Reflecting on Masculinities Through the Eye of the Needle

Brandon Hamber[1]

Keynote address at the launch of the Textile Language of Conflicts Exhibition
Magee Campus, Ulster University, 6 November 2017

Thank you very much for inviting me to open this important exhibition.[2] I want to thank Roberta Bacic for the opportunity to speak and for her continual approach to pushing the boundaries. Asking me to speak on masculinities, which I've been researching over the last number of years, is an example of her always trying to expand the work of Conflict Textiles.[3]

This is a phenomenal collection, and I want to congratulate all involved.[4] It is amazing for me to be here. It was some 10 years ago that Roberta came to me with the first conflict-related textile to arrive in Northern Ireland and asked me to transport it in my car to an event. I didn't know what it was. To me, it initially just looked like a big colourful quilt or blanket. But thinking back, what fascinated me about the first textile Roberta brought to Northern Ireland was that Roberta said to me, "This was an example of how some women in Peru gave testimony to their Truth Commission". At the time, I had just finished doing work on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I was captivated by the idea that someone could give testimony without sitting behind a desk, with a microphone, and having to tell a linear story. That idea stuck with me.

Ten years later, Roberta has done exhibitions all over the world about Chilean *arpilleras* and other textiles. It's incredible. To see this come full circle today, in the form of an exhibition at the university where I work, is fantastic. Thank you Roberta for allowing these works to continue to speak and share their testimony.

I'm not an expert on *arpilleras* or textiles. I can only offer a few modest thoughts, and I'll address some issues related to masculinities as requested. But before making a bigger argument about masculinities, I want to make three introductory points about why these textiles "work" and are so powerful.

The first reason is the simplicity of the materials. There's something deeply simple in the creation of what you see. But at the same time, when you *really* look at them, they're incredibly complex. Telling stories of great pain, hope, complexity, and symbolism.

---

[1] Brandon Hamber is John Hume and Thomas P. O'Neill Chair in Peace based at the International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE), Ulster University. All correspondence to b.hamber@ulster.ac.uk.
[2] Details on the exhibition as well as images of all the pieces curated are available at http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts/fullevent/?id=171
[3] To see the collection online visit: http://www.conflicttextiles.com
[4] I specifically want to congratulate Roberta and everyone from around the world who created these wonderful textiles. They wouldn't be here without Roberta Bacic and her assistant curator, Breege Doherty. For this exhibition, I also thank Gillian Robinson from INCORE for helping organise this event, and Janet Farren and Cristal Palacios for their assistance.

The second is that what is deemed craft-making, especially when made by women, is often demoted in the hierarchy of high art and other forms of visual representation or activity. But what the women do in these *arpilleras*, and in the other pieces, is to turn this on its head. They show the real power that can be done with this type of work. They make politics public through a medium many mistakenly consider private or domestic. They are public artists.

The third point links to some of the work I've done over the years, looking at memorials.[5] The textiles aren't really memorials in the traditional sense, although they are commemorative and memorials of a sort. In my work on memorials, I have looked at why some memorials "work", that is why they resonate with viewers and those for whom they commemorate. There are multiple reasons for this, but one is that memorials "work" because they embody something individual and collective at the same time.

If you think of the Vietnam War Memorial in the US, the process of establishing that memorial was deeply contested. Still, it works because when you see the individual names on the wall as part of a large, impressive, sweeping structure, the experience is collective at the same time. One of the biggest "memorials" in the world is the AIDS Quilt. The AIDS Quilt works because each square is highly personal. But when you see it spread out over the Washington Mall, it's an incredibly collective experience. The same happens for *arpirellas* and the textiles here.

Each piece is so individual. Somebody might make it from a loved one's clothing after they die; it might be made from something very special to the creator, such as a husband's tie, or it might embody a photograph of a loved one. But the overall impact is collective. The pieces speak of unity in their creation and representation. Together, this makes such textiles "sacred" to the creator and the observer.

So, what does this all have to do with the issues of masculinities?

As I said, Roberta likes to push the boundaries, so she asked me to talk on this topic to stretch our thinking. I came up with the strange title "Reflecting on Masculinity Through the Eye of the Needle," obviously referring to needlework and textiles.

But the title also came to me from a Sting song. When selecting the title, he was on my mind because of his famous song "They Dance Alone (Cueca Solo)", which is represented in so many textiles in the Conflict Textiles collection.[6] But it was not that only that song I remembered, but rather the song, which I think is about losing his father, called "All This Time". The song has these lines:

---

[5] Hamber, B., & Palmary, I. (2009). Gender, Memorialisation, and Symbolic Reparations. In R. Rubio-Marin (Ed.), *The Gender of Reparations: Unsettling Sexual Hierarchies While Redressing Human Rights Violations* (pp. 324-381). New York: Cambridge University Press. Also see Hamber, B. (2006). Narrowing the Micro and Macro: A Psychological Perspective on Reparations in Societies in Transition. In P. De Greiff (Ed.), *The Handbook of Reparations* (pp. 560-588). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[6] See for example, *La cueca sola* at https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts2/fulltextiles1/?id=414

Blessed are the poor for they shall inherit the earth. Better to be poor than a fat man in the eye of a needle. As these words were spoken, I swear I heard the old man laughing. What good is a used up world and how can it be worth having?"

The song goes on:

Men go crazy in congregations. They only get better one by one.

I've often thought about these lines. I trained as a Clinical Psychologist. I came from a world where I believed that people only got better one by one. But the more I'm engaged in the political world, I've realised that people who have suffered political violence heal in groups. Political violence occurs in a political space, often collectively, and dealing with it therefore involves engaging in this space. Healing happens in communal and collective activity.

Healing (and change) happens in creating textiles together. It happens in creating art and music. It happens in social movements. It happens on the streets and in protest. It happens through collective resistance. It happens in public courtrooms. It happens in productive workplaces. It even happens in parliaments that learn to compromise and constructively disagree, which would be nice in many parts of the world right now, including our own.

In short, there's something about the woman's communal and political activities that makes these pieces important. The textiles shed light on the dynamics of conflict and the process of coming to terms with loss and resisting forgetting, not just as an individual but as groups.

In terms of masculinities, particularly, I will make two overarching points and then a concluding comment.

The first overarching point is that, as some of you may know, those of us who study masculinity never talk of masculinity, only masculinities, because there are multiple forms of masculinity. There can be a violent soldiering form of masculinity. But there are masculinities expressed in the workplace, on the rugby and soccer pitch, in the boxing ring, in the theatre, expressed by dancers, by priests from the pulpit, by professors in academia, in aid organisations, and gay masculinities, and so on.

But although there are multiple ways in which masculinities are expressed, some are more dominant than others. This is important because we often focus only on two types of masculinity and forget this complexity.

We focus on what some people call *toxic masculinities*. These are the masculinities that are often associated with what are considered negative male traits, such as hyper competition, violence, being unemotional, sexually predatory behaviour, risk-taking and so on. We call these toxic because they have toxic impacts on everyone in society, including those that embody them. These toxic impacts manifest in different ways. For example, masculinities of this sort can result in men failing to go to the doctor and living

with a painful condition unnecessarily, or young men driving recklessly and killing themselves and others. It can be as "ordinary" as that or it can express itself in other forms, say in domestic violence against women or the use of violence to solve problems in the home and community.

We also tend to focus on what are called *violent masculinities or militarised masculinities*. These masculinities are expressed and proven through violent activities and often through military infrastructures and methods, primarily through combat. When we look at some of these excellent pieces in the exhibition, we will see examples of these violent militarised masculinities. We will see men in uniform committing human rights violations. Several textiles show men in uniform without faces. Disembodied callous uniforms perfectly capture the concept and reality of violent militarised masculinities.

But the bigger point that I have been exploring in my research is a third type of masculinity directly linked to political violence and conflict. You could call it *political or structural masculinities*. These are the masculinities that we don't really see directly. These are the masculinities which exist in the boardroom. These are the masculinities that exist in parliament. Masculinities that feed racism and exclusion. These are the masculinities embodied in the arms industry. The masculinities which are enacted through aggressive multinationals or even local leaders that exploit people through creating or perpetuating structural injustices. These are the *political and structural masculinities* that drive militarised and violent masculinities.

These are, to twist Sting's words, generally the fat men in the eye of the needle!

Most importantly, thinking about these men tells us a lot about webs of power.

Think of it this way, who is more powerful and demonstrating a type of hegemonic masculinity: the gun-toting homophobic macho gang member in the barrio; the metrosexual male buying shares in an environmentally unethical company from his laptop in Starbucks; a farmer who lost his land during political conflict and now is a labourer in the city, drinks too much and takes it out on his wife violently; a politician in an expensive suit banging the table while he outlines the merits of welfare cuts, limited worker rights, austerity and increasing the size of the military; the former combatant who has lost his livelihood, cannot find employment and is prone to depression and bar fights; or the White, tolerant, middle-class open-minded male academic speculating about his woes in academic journals?

How did all these men attain their power, and how are they interrelated? And, finally, where are the women, either as dominated by the men in the vignettes outlined above or resisting or complicit in propping them up?

The challenge in the conflict field is not to overly focus on the violent masculinities at the expense of understanding and illuminating masculine political structures and ways of being. We must talk about webs of power and complicity in their maintenance and expansion.

I also make this point because in this exhibition, the pieces clearly show violent masculinities, but they also highlight political and structural masculinities. There are pieces about global debt relief: how debt creates poverty and reinforces certain forms of harm. There are pieces here on the dam social movements in Brazil that highlight the negative social and environmental impacts of water projects on local communities. There are pieces here which are about the dangers of pollution.

It was interesting for me to see an exhibition capturing all these masculinities rather than just violent masculinities.

The second overarching point I wanted to make about masculinities is our tendency in the peace and conflict field to not only overly focus on violent masculinities but also to couple this with a continual focus on the vulnerabilities of women. I don't want this to be misunderstood. I am not saying that violent masculinities are not devastating and we should completely ignore them, or that women are not victims of conflict in a special way. We should not minimise the impact of male violence on women.

But at the same time, we need to be careful about being subsumed into the language of vulnerability. This language of vulnerability often feeds into the very masculine dynamics that perpetuate conflict. The language of vulnerability creates a line between the protector and the protected. This feeds into our gendered world and often turns out to be used as the justification for conflict. The language of the aggressive protector is deeply embedded in war language and in war talk. Think of how the suffering of Afghan women was built into the rhetoric of the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, which was about so much more.

In other words, we must be careful about how we portray the agency of women. Portraying women only as victims of conflict, only as vulnerable and all men as violent perpetrators, creates a negative masculinity fuelled vortex that is hard to escape. Interestingly, when I look at the exhibition, I don't see "agentless" women. I see representations of active women engaged in the environment, in social justice movements, in the politics of leisure, in the politics of domesticity, in the politics of violence, in the politics of protest, in the politics of peace, and in the politics of healing. I also see depictions of the ordinary, such as laundrettes and beaches, during times of war. I also see violent masculinities enacted, but this is connected to the wider web of structural and political issues in this exhibition, as I said. Overall, I see a direct challenge to the idea of portraying women, as is often the case in conflict art and memorialisation, as only needing protection or rescue. This is incredibly powerful. I presume the pieces were all carefully chosen for these very reasons.

To conclude, I will leave you with a challenge: what do we do about all these masculinities?

In my work, one option I often talk about is the need to highlight and demonstrate the multiple, challenging masculinities that exist. We must show the negative impact of toxic and violent masculinities. Still, we must also emphasise that there are hierarchies

of masculinities and that there are many multiple and different masculinities playing themselves out all the time. They are vying for social space; they are vying for social power. Some masculinities are accentuated, and others are repressed and even crushed. Other masculinities are deceiving; they seem to be all about power, but they are manifestations of fear and being disempowered by other, often more powerful men. We must underscore these complexities.

For example, we must be clearer in talking about men as civilians in conflict and as vulnerable too. It's something we hardly ever hear. Most men in conflict are civilians. When you look at the people coming over to Europe in the refugee boats—as much as the press and conservative politicians want us to see these as dangerous young men—they're actually vulnerable civilians with no real power. This reminds me of the young violent men in West Baltimore described by Ta-Nehisi Coates in his book *Between the World and Me* when he notes:

> *The crews walked the blocks of the neighborhood, loud and rude, because it was only through their loud rudeness that they might feel any sense of security and power.*

He goes on to show how this disempowerment is linked to structural and racialised—and I would add masculinised—power in the United States. The US is not alone in this phenomenon, the same issues can be observed in gangs around the world, paramilitary structures and militia, army recruiting offices and basic training grounds, battlefields, and on the streets with drunken men fighting on a Friday night—all connected inextricably to powerful processes and masculinised structures far beyond the violence enacted by men on both men and women in these contexts.

Our challenge is to accentuate and understand these different types of masculinities, and of course, challenge them. We need the vocabulary and courage to label, deconstruct, and challenge political and structural masculinities. Men must also become aware of these multiple masculinities to create conflict among themselves, and with others force change. It is when we make visible and create conflict between different types of masculinity, rather than assume or acquiesce to a single hegemonic masculinity, that new and more functional and healthy masculinities will emerge.

Finally, how would we engage men in the type of work represented in this exhibition? Or engage women to represent men—and more importantly, masculinities—in multiple different ways?

This exhibition has been an incredible stimulus for me, and I know it will be for everybody else. When I was walking around the exhibition earlier today, the words of the artist Georges Braque came into my head: "Art is a wound turned into the light". I want to thank Roberta, and all the people who've worked on this exhibition—and importantly the women who made these pieces thousands of miles away—for providing us with a bright light to better see and understand complex conflicts.

Thank you.