

**“Nothing good ever comes out of conflict.”**

By Poppy Cummins

Despite creating a legacy of loss and tragedy, conflict can provide an impetus for positive change and an opportunity to escape degradation. It can cause both irreversible trauma upon some, and alternatively empower others to overcome adversity with the restorative power of forgiveness. Pablo Picasso’s “Weeping Woman” (1937), painted in response to the bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War, can be viewed as the portrayal of the sweeping demoralization and suffering that occurs during conflict. Picasso’s work depicts a woman hunched and crying, cradling a dead baby in her arms. Picasso’s depiction of the woman’s (Dora Maar) excoriated face – her angular, fractured facial features, black cavernous eyes and tortured expression – painted in a lurid green – has become an iconic representation of universal human suffering. The painting presents the woman’s mourning as raw and corruptive; similar, too, are the consequences impacted upon the victims of warfare. Responses can manifest immediately in grief and isolation, and also in a generational development, with resentment, displacement, confusion and social apathy that decimates identities and cultures. In Bruce Beresford’s “Paradise Road”, angelic Rosemary Leighton-Jones experiences loss and anguish through the death of her beloved husband Dennis after his attempted escape from Sumatra. The loss of Rosemary’s primary source of hope and optimism – her love her spouse which is like a “burning flame” fuelling her survival – destroys her will to live and leads her to withdraw from the women, bereft, accepting the grim inevitability of her fate as she declares that “we will never leave Sumatra”. Rosemary’s acquiescence to the horrors of conflict reveals Beresford’s contention that even the most innocent and benevolent individuals can be depleted of morality and resilience in their encounters with tragic circumstances of conflict. Alternatively, victims of conflict can harness inherent convictions, strength and emotional control to overcome traumatic instances and pave the way to an enlightened, enriching future. Nick Ut’s iconic photograph, most commonly referred to as “Napalm Girl” (1972), has become both a profound visual document of the horrors of the Vietnam War, and also a tool of empowerment for its subject, Phan Thi Kim Phuc. The image depicts young Kim Phuc, aged nine, running naked down a highway near a rural village in South Vietnam - screaming as painful napalm scarred the flesh of her back and arms. Kim Phuc suffered third degree burns on 30% of her body as a result of the dropping of a napalm bomb by North Vietnamese airplanes on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 1972. Although the photograph epitomizes the loss of innocence and suffering of war, Kim Phuc’s extraordinary recovery from the incident is a testament to the indomitability of the human spirit. Kim Phuc miraculously survived the napalm bombing as a result of thirteen months of hospital treatments. She has since trained to become a medical doctor and has defected to Canada, where she now lives with her husband and family. Despite the physical and psychological suffering Phuc endured, she now testifies that, with the help of Christianity, she has overcome bitterness to embrace positive change, attesting that “forgiveness is more powerful than any weapon of war”; helping her to be “free[d] from hatred”. “I still have many scars on my body and pain on most days, but my heart is cleansed.” Such a victory suggests that while acquiescence can be a harmful yet undeniable response to conflict, the benefits that one can experience by refusing to entrench themselves in resentment and fear can be abundant and empowering. By reconciling oneself with the past, victims of conflict can restore their identity and morality, and in turn inspire others to make positive changes to their attitudes.

Conflict can be a catalyst of loss and destruction upon innocent people and societies, shattering unity and faith in senseless, unrelenting violence. Colonisation is one such type of insurrection that is by definition irreversibly destructive, as it establishes an immediate and inherent power imbalance, the subjugation of communities and an irreparable demoralisation and impact on cultural traditions, which can perpetuate through generations. Julie Gough's artwork "Imperialism" (1994) evokes the marginalisation of minority groups and the devastating impact this can have on communities, through depicting the plight of Indigenous Australians during British colonisation. The artwork depicts a collection of identical miniature heads, profiles of Indigenous Australians carved of "Imperial Leather" soap and arranged down the central stripes of the Union Jack on the British flag, which is coloured red and forms the background of the piece. The use of "Imperial Leather" soap symbolises Gough's condemnation of racist treatment of her ancestors, as though the cleansing properties of the material (a staple artefact of traditional British lifestyle) were synonymous with ethnic cleansing, and the decimation of their culture as the British attempted to figuratively "carve" Aborigines into a bizarre and alien culture. Similarly, the symbolic significance of the red colour of the Union Jack connotes the blood on the hands of the colonisers, and the nooses around the caricatured heads symbolise both the death and total annihilation of the community. Overall, Gough's piece highlights the permanency of the devastation of colonisation through the use of powerful symbolism – crystallising the documentation of suffering that was caused by the imposition of alien and corrupting beliefs. The evidence of the plight of Indigenous Australians is a constant social and political concern in modern society: we must only compare life expectancy rates, health and education, socio-economic statuses and career opportunities of Indigenous Australians to ascertain the immense generational impacts of the conflict of colonisation on their culture. These ramifications can, therefore, permeate and define lives long after a resolution to the issue has been reached. Similarly, "Paradise Road" explores this concern through exposing the paradoxical treatment of Japanese armed forces upon European inhabitants of prisoners of war camps. Beresford juxtaposes the initial patriotic and supercilious attitude of the women to that of the licentious and immoral Japanese soldiers to create subtle political commentary on the consequences that can fall on the perpetrators once the power hierarchy has been overturned. The vengeance and hatred of the Japanese towards their former British colonialists is evoked in their declaration: "now the situation is 100% reversed".

Irreversible damage to cultural unity can spawn dislocation, suffering and resentment; however, regaining one's identity and humanising the victims of conflict can help to diffuse these consequences and restore justice. Anonymous photographer "JR" aims at rectifying such issues through the use of powerful images. "JR" creates "Pervasive Art" – meeting and photographing ordinary individuals of war-torn, poverty-stricken countries, and displaying these portraits as large-scale murals illegally on massive local canvases: buildings, buses, roads and bridges. JR's "guerrilla artist" technique aims at provocation in order to start dialogue about both his subjects and the social, economic, political and historical backgrounds and reasons for the circumstance. The enormity of his pieces aims at creating both an interactive and visual display of the individuals that make up our surroundings, and sharing their stories to a global audience. By breaking down the physical confinements of gallery spaces and exhibitions, JR too attempts to erode language and cultural barriers which prevent societies gaining awareness of the lives and treatment of others around the world. His photographic project "Face 2 Face" (2007) testifies this philosophy through his photographs of Palestinian citizens caught within the Israeli-Palestinian war, which he displayed upon either sides of the Separation Border between the two countries. The comical expressions worn by his subjects evokes the power of humour and optimism in bringing respite to the tragedy and solemnity of conflict. JR's artwork triumphs at giving those marginalised people a sense of worth and voice, placing a human face literally and symbolically upon the issue to avoid such victims being forgotten or reduced as another statistic of war. While the

devastation that is caused upon those on the periphery of war should be condemned, JR aims to enlighten such unfortunate “children of dispossession” trapped within it, through allowing both the individual and the global collective to realise their identity. This in turn creates confidence, belonging and cohesion within communities, and ultimately enriches societies with hope and optimism, and the strength to combat the consequences of war using indestructible humanity.

The negative impacts of conflict can be healed by the empowering act of reconciliation within and between stakeholders. Inner reconciliation of one’s identity can promote deeper self-understanding and increase the prospect of emerging from conflict morally and physically intact. A capacity to reconcile one’s identity with that of the harmonious past with the torn and ravaged present environment is dependent on the integrity of one’s moral code and values. Choosing to empower oneself and regain one’s dignity in defiance of the myriad of pressures and adversity one faces can lead to not only inner restoration but unexpected alliances. Humanizing the opposition/oppressor during conflict not only attests the true humanity of an individual but moreover helps to slowly break down the demarcating power imbalances which makes conflict resolution often impossible. The unexpected alliances between Adrienne and Sergeant Tomiashi is a testament to this restorative act, as their connection is formed through the life-affirming aspect of music. Tomiashi’s act of singing to Adrienne not only praises the power of non-verbal communication (and reforms Tomiashi’s initial identity as a licentious officer to a man with inner reserves of compassion) but furthermore signifies that empathy can transcend injustice, brutality and violence to allow individuals to recognise a common ground and universally mutual humanity that exists regardless of race, gender, social hierarchy/status and circumstance. Desmond Tutu, a social activist who gained notoriety through his opposition to the South African apartheid (1943-1993), reflects this concept by stating: “When we see others as the enemy, we risk becoming what we hate. When we oppress others, we end up oppressing ourselves. All of our humanity is dependent upon recognizing the humanity in others.” The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a court-like restorative justice body established after the abolition of apartheid in South Africa. The aim of the Commission was to invite witnesses identified as victims of gross human right violations to give statements/public hearings about their experiences, and perpetrators could be granted amnesty in exchange for full disclosure of information of the crimes. Not only did this body provide a resolution to the political tensions between the South African and Afrikaaner (Dutch) cultures, but strengthened relationships between the oppressors and the oppressed through providing closure and reconciliation to the demoralization of the South African race. This act has been generally accepted to be successful in restoring peace and democracy after a devastating historical/civil era, and signifies the power that human alliances and positive communication can have as an antidote to the ailment of conflict and dehumanisation. If opposing parties chose to come together to recognise a common ground, harmony, enriched relationship and respect can foster, potentially causing conflict resolution.

Conflict can paradoxically be cataclysmic and enlightening to both individuals and societies. It would be untruthful to deny the hardship and suffering wrought during these circumstances, yet equally pessimistic to doom those incapable of recovery. Depending upon the severity of the impact of insurrection, victims can harness their morality and convictions to overcome adversity and create resolution and change. Such affirmation can not only combat loss but similarly spread a broader global message of resilience, which can serve as an invaluable reminder of human indomitability during suffering. Abraham Lincoln acknowledges this universal fact that while ruinous, conflict can provide “creative energy, an impetus for progress and the opportunity to deepen our experience in life.”

