

**Book Review: Amony, Evelyn (2015). *I am Evelyn Amony: Reclaiming My Life from the Lord's Resistance Army*. Edited by Erin Baines. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.**

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In this recently published narrative of the Ugandan civil war, editor Erin Baines introduces her readers to Evelyn Amony. Evelyn is a thirty-four year old survivor of Uganda's long civil war — a war that saw her abducted from her home by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) at the age of eleven and which subsequently saw her betrothal to LRA commander Joseph Kony at age fourteen. *I am Evelyn Amony: Reclaiming My Life from the Lord's Resistance Army* is Evelyn's own account of her time with the LRA as well as the time she spent reassembling her life following her release. Unlike other monographs which have addressed the theoretical and practical challenges which confront former combatants,<sup>1</sup> the presentation of Evelyn's story is entirely unique. Evelyn's narrative of her time with the LRA is not filtered through Baines' scholarly imagination. Which is to say that Baines does not cherry-pick elements from Evelyn's narrative so as to support her own conclusions regarding the LRA and the Ugandan civil war. Instead, Baines has taken the unprecedented and inspiring step of letting Evelyn's powerful narrative stand on its own. Evelyn, herself, remarks that this is how things should be; one should be able to speak their own truth, she says, it deserves to be acknowledged by others as a valid experiential narrative.

In taking such a novel methodological approach, Baines has helped to elevate Evelyn's story beyond the status of mere narrative. In fact, by weaving key historical details about Uganda, the LRA and the Juba peace process throughout Evelyn's autoethnography, Baines and Amony have crafted a critical and narratively-orientated text on the Ugandan civil war. A text that addresses several key themes appropriate to both critical security studies and narrative politics. And, while some of these themes remain largely implicit, others are presented so candidly that they provoke the learned reader into an appraisal of contemporary critical thought as well as some of its most essential ontological assumptions. Chief among such appraisals is that which concerns the situatedness of the self under disciplinary mechanisms of subject formation.

Michel Foucault's works on discipline, governmentality, and biopolitics have had a lasting impact on contemporary critical thought and its analysis of the subject. Among Foucault's

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<sup>1</sup> See: Cynthia Enloe, *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Michael Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

most important contributions, notes Jenny Edkins, is his dismissal of the Cartesian subject and its replacement by the ‘explicitly technologized, depoliticized subject of modernity’ — in effect, the ‘subject as produced by disciplinary practices.’<sup>2</sup> Such contributions have led many critical scholars to discredit the validity of subjects’ individual narratives. These narratives, according to a Foucauldian ontology, emanate from the institutional nodes of social power rather than from the consciousness of a self-reflexive subject. Evelyn’s narrative, however, complicates our field’s Foucauldian inheritance in a nuanced and productive manner. While Evelyn does indeed highlight the disciplinary mechanisms immanent to life with the LRA — one particular example being the violent beatings she received from Kony’s bodyguards for refusing to share a bed with the LRA commander<sup>3</sup> — she also acknowledges the porous and inconsistent manner in which these mechanisms are deployed.

While the aforementioned beatings were intended to discipline women like Evelyn into abdicating their bodily sovereignty to the masculine sexual authority of Kony and his senior commanders, in effect creating an army of docile bodies for sexual consumption, the jealousy that Kony’s promiscuity encouraged among such women ensured that newcomers to the LRA, like Evelyn, were treated with violent disdain by the women who felt they were losing favour with Kony and his inner-circle.<sup>4</sup> In other words, Evelyn found herself caught between an institutional narrative that implored her to give freely of her body qua sexual object and a counter narrative that suggested her sexual reification was a threat to the social stature of the other women around her. Susan Okin has remarked that such occurrences are par for the course in patriarchal settings. Women affected by polygamy, says Okin, regard it as an unbearable institution that often leads to ‘immense hostility, resentment, [and] even violence’ among co-wives.<sup>5</sup> Although such hostility and violence did, in Evelyn’s case, have the unintended side-effect of driving her closer to Kony at times, it also — at a much broader level of analysis — situated her subjectivity at the nexus between two competing disciplinary narratives.

As a result, Evelyn’s readers bear witness to the internal struggle that individuals face when attempting to navigate a plurality of sometimes competing disciplinary narratives. Evelyn herself remarks on her interstitial positionality in stating that it made her believe that women — except in their capacity as sexual objects — were useless to the LRA.<sup>6</sup> Evelyn’s experience(s), then, indicate that Foucauldian-inspired ontologies illustrate too simple a picture when they imply the absence of the phenomenological subject from processes of technological subject formation. Evelyn’s narrative, quite clearly testifies to the fact that subjects fulfill an essential role in their own formation and positionality. Although individual subjects like Evelyn may have little control over which technological narratives populate the realm of their social existence, it is clear that they do actively participate in the reconciliation of these, imaginary narratives or, alternatively — where reconciliation is improbable — the active dismissal of narratives deemed to be enslaving or exploitive.

<sup>2</sup> Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations: Bringing the Political Back In*, (Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner, 1999), pp. 41-42.

<sup>3</sup> Evelyn Amony, *I Am Evelyn Amony*, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* pp. 43-47.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Moller Okin (ed.), ‘Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?’ in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Evelyn Amony, *I Am Evelyn Amony*, p. 62.

To be clear, this is not to suggest that Evelyn's narrative supports a return to Cartesianism in our considerations of human subjectivity. It is, however, to suggest that the way in which disciplinary technologies and their associated narratives are experienced is essential to the manner in which they are later reiterated and preformed by the disciplined subject. Individual narratives, then, are more than discrete or subjective accounts of a particular set of events. They are, in actuality, highly detailed primary texts which document processes of subject-formation in diverse spatio-temporal circumstances — as is the case with Evelyn's narrative of the Ugandan civil war. Moreover, while it is true that Evelyn's narrative depicts the phenomenological experiences of a subject navigating or experiencing their own disciplinary production, it also chronicles the resistances which are inherent and, sometimes, unconsciously incorporated into such a process.

Commenting on the politics of memory and trauma, Edkins has argued that narratives of anguish, loss, or grief can be appropriated by any number of powerful groups for their own political purposes.<sup>7</sup> Yet Evelyn documents how the phenomenological experience of grief can actually evade such political appropriation. After her release from the LRA, Evelyn discusses her participation in a rally that was intended to commemorate the memory of abducted children lost during the war. We 'marched in sorrow,' says Evelyn, 'we did not say anything' despite many drivers asking why we marched in silence.<sup>8</sup> In spite of such inquisitions, Evelyn later remarks that the demonstrators' silence was a means of lamenting the loss of their friends as well as the manner in which society had stigmatized LRA abductees qua fighters.<sup>9</sup> Evelyn herself was the subject of such exclusionary practices. 'Everything that I do, says Evelyn, people would say that I am Kony's wife, Kony's wife, Kony's wife.'<sup>10</sup> While Evelyn's staccato repetition of this phrase speaks to her community's repeated allegations of her guilt and wrongdoing during the war, it also speaks — very loudly — to the rationale for the demonstrators' silence.

By silently withholding the narrative of loss that accompanied their performative actions, the aforementioned demonstrators inhibited any number of powerful actors from identifying them as a group whose grief challenged the state and its official narrative that the LRA was an illegitimate rural insurgency whose existence inhibited the burgeoning of the Ugandan state.<sup>11</sup> In effect, the unwillingness to narrate particular phenomenological experiences — such as grief or loss — forms a buttress against powerful actors who would use such affective experiences as an impetus for the deployment of renewed social and disciplinary controls. Put simply, the demonstrators' unwillingness to put their grief into words stymied the state in any possible attempt to portray them as an abnormal or threatening social element. In this way then, Evelyn's discussion of these events — and, really, her whole auto-ethnography — speaks to the myriad and powerful ways in which an individual's phenomenological experiences assist them in navigating, making sense of, and in some cases, resisting, disciplinary social narratives. The fact that Evelyn develops an appreciation of these realities as they apply to the Ugandan civil war is enough to elevate her text to the status of essential reading, but the fact that many of her

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<sup>7</sup> Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> Evelyn Amony, *I Am Evelyn Amony*, p. 151.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p. 151.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Van Acker, 'Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army: The New Order No One Ordered,' *African Affairs*, 103:412, 2004, p. 336.

observations — including many regarding the status women — have currency in a context much wider than that of Uganda alone, solidifies her text as an exemplar of the new and exciting stage in critical social research that is the narrative turn.