

## BURIED IN THE HEART

In *Buried in the Heart*, Erin Baines explores the political agency of women abducted as children by the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda, forced to marry its commanders and to bear their children. Introducing the concept of complex victimhood, she argues that abducted women were not passive victims, but navigated complex social and political worlds that were life inside the violent armed group. Exploring the life stories of thirty women, Baines considers the possibilities of storytelling to reclaim one's sense of self and relations to others, and to generate political judgement after mass violence. *Buried in the Heart* moves beyond victim and perpetrator frameworks prevalent in the field of transitional justice, shifting the attention to stories of living through mass violence and the possibilities of remaking communities after it. The book contributes to an overlooked aspect of international justice: women's political agency during wartime.

Erin Baines is an Associate Professor at the Liu Institute for Global Issues at the University of British Columbia. She is the author of *Vulnerable Bodies: Gender, the UN and the Global Refugee Crisis* (2004), and the editor of a life history of a woman who spent eleven years inside the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), *I Am Evelyn Amony: Reclaiming My Life from the LRA* (2015). She has published articles on gender, responsibility and transitional justice, social repair, symbolic violence and forced marriage in the *Journal of Peace Research*, the *International Journal of Transitional Justice* (IJTJ) *African Affairs*, the *Journal of Modern African Studies* and the *Journal of Human Rights*.

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# Buried in the Heart

WOMEN, COMPLEX VICTIMHOOD AND THE WAR IN  
NORTHERN UGANDA

ERIN BAINES  
University of British Columbia



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*For the missing and missed*

She is my country  
everytime she goes  
I am a leaf in the wind  
everytime she goes  
she takes with her  
all the home that I can ever claim  
  
what use do I have  
for the carrier of bones  
  
what anthem can I sing  
for the graves of children  
  
she holds my home in the country that she is  
& every time she returns  
she is my flag & I am home again

Juliane Okot Bitek, *Day 40, 100 Days*

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## Foreword

In the memoir of Evelyn Amony's life in and after her abduction by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the author tells a story she describes as "particularly painful," one she has been unable to tell anyone, "not even [her] own mother." It involves an evening some months after her abduction from her village and after she had moved a great distance in a military convoy transporting foodstuffs to a safe base. Along the way, Evelyn spills a cupful of sorghum and, when confronted by rebel commander Joseph Kony, she pleads with him, telling him that she could lead him to her home village, which was nearby. There, she tells Kony, her mother has at least four granaries full of sorghum that she would gladly give him to replace the small amount Evelyn had lost.

In response, Kony orders a boy of Evelyn's age to whip her as she lies face down. If she should move or cry out, Kony tells the boy, he should begin to whip her over again. At some point, Evelyn loses consciousness. She is left unattended overnight but in the morning, when Kony sees that Evelyn will survive, he consoles her, and gives her medicine to help her heal. In her account of this incident, Evelyn reflects on Kony's offer to help her as if she were once more there, reliving the moment: "First you want to kill me? And . . . now you want to give me medicine to live? I would rather die. Was I really beaten for the sorghum I spilled?" When Kony leaves she throws the medicine away.

The same boy who inflicted the beating on Evelyn is then ordered to carry her to a nursing station. The boy remains with Evelyn and watches as a nurse attends to her wounds, using warm water to loosen the threads of fabric that had become enmeshed in her flesh. The boy begins to cry. "Is this how people are really beaten?" he asks her, "For just sorghum?" The two begin to cry together.

It was, I would suggest, Kony's intention to sever Evelyn's affinity for her mother, to whom she looked as a source of continuing protection; to replace a sense of longing for home with fear. Yet in recalling the story, Evelyn leads us to another place, one the commander could not reach, for she still loves her mother enough to want to protect her from the story and the heartbreak it would bring if she were to hear it.

Through their tears – forbidden in the LRA – Evelyn and the unnamed boy together mourn a common fate. Their roles could easily have been reversed, with Evelyn inflicting a beating on the boy. In their silent exchange, they communicate

both the arbitrariness of violence and the uselessness of it: the violence served no other purpose than to dehumanize those subject to it, and those forced to impose it. If Kony's purpose was to create an army of those willing to kill for his cause, he did so through infliction of violence without cause. In Evelyn's acts of refusal, in the performance of mourning, and in her act of love for her mother, she denied Kony any measure of success in that purpose. Through bearing witness to useless violence, Amony challenges assumptions about the LRA's ability to dominate absolutely, Evelyn did not submit, she did not become like them.

## Preface

We are trying to build a life for ourselves.

– Evelyn Amony

Amongst the war affected in northern Uganda, it is sometimes difficult to disentangle victims and perpetrators. For more than a decade, starting in the early 1990s, young Acholi<sup>1</sup> boys and girls followed their parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts into one of the hundreds of displaced persons camps created by the Government of Uganda. The rebels abducted tens of thousands of children and youth, and if they did not escape or were not released shortly thereafter, they were trained, given a weapon and made to fight. As abducted girls matured, they were forced to marry rebel commanders and give birth, fulfilling the spiritual vision of its leader, Joseph Kony, to create a “New Acholi.” Most were brought to LRA bases in Sudan and, with little hope of escape, they settled to raise their children, run the home and orient newly abducted children. Others – their numbers unknown – were recruited into a camp militia and some later joined or were forced into the Ugandan military as soldiers, or wives to soldiers. Each party to the conflict – the rebels and the Ugandan military – terrorized the civilian population, displacing more young boys and girls, and the cycle continued. Those who avoided recruitment or abduction had to continue to dodge both parties. If either the rebels or soldiers came across civilians, they forced them to pledge allegiance to the cause. If they mixed up a rebel and a soldier – something that was easy to do in the dark, and because both parties to the conflict wore similar uniforms – they were accused of being traitors and punished. It was perhaps no surprise then that so many young men and women who did escape the rebels found it difficult to integrate within communities that had been afflicted and divided by more than two decades of violence. This extends to the children born in the rebel group. Consider the reflections of one mother on how community members treat the child she gave birth to “in captivity”:

He is called “Kony” even from our own home. They do not call him any other name. They always call him Kony. They say that his mind is like Kony. They say that he acts like Kony in every way. They say that people

<sup>1</sup> The Acholi are a Luo speaking Nilotic group in the north of the country; the majority of the LRA and its leadership were Acholi.

should just wait and see because the boy will be a General like his father. They say, “You wait for this child to grow, he will become a real rebel to Kony. He is a real General.”

This book is based on the life stories of 30 women abducted by the LRA who have since returned with children born of forced marriages to rebel commanders. It seeks to understand their efforts to return home and fit into a community that now sees them as the mothers of rebel children. Many describe the daily challenges of seeking to conceal their identities, and those of their sons and daughters, in an effort to start over again. Most left their communities in the village<sup>2</sup> and moved to Gulu – the largest city in northern Uganda – to access aid programmes designed to help “child mothers,” as they are often locally called. In the mid-2000s, international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) had earmarked significant funding for skills training and income generation projects for “child mothers” and created scholarships for their children “born of war.” Given that many were confronted with dire poverty, poor living conditions and continuing health issues, these programmes were welcomed. Most women found themselves alone, solely responsible for raising their children: “How can we take care of the children we have returned with if there is no one taking care of us?”

In their neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Gulu town, in market places and in churches and mosques, women make conscious efforts to hide their pasts, careful with whom they share stories of “life in the bush.” They coach their children to speak quietly and to never fight or get into trouble. They hold their tongues when negative words are spoken about the rebels, and isolate themselves when they feel they cannot contain their anger:

You should keep quiet when you hear people talking about Kony. Be quiet. No one knows that I came from the bush in the area where I stay. I live with everyone equally. When I am annoyed over something, I leave the place and go somewhere else. There are some things we can control individually. If you cannot control your temper, everyone staying in your area will know that you came from the bush. Be humble with people. When they are talking about a certain topic, answer them accordingly. Life will go on. No one knows where I stay that I come from the bush.

But even with careful efforts to control their behaviour and that of their children, their past is revealed in other ways.<sup>3</sup> One evening in 2005, I had invited a woman I had met at a rehabilitation centre and developed a friendship with to come to

<sup>2</sup> The women involved in this book escaped between 2000 and 2005; some were reunited in displaced persons camps, or in town centres where their families lived. When the war ended, the government shut down the camps, and started a resettlement process of families to their villages. All thirty women involved in documenting their life stories, and the thirty other women who participated in group discussions, decided to leave the camp or village to live in the town centre of Gulu.

<sup>3</sup> Theo Hollander and Bani Gill. “Every day the war continues in my body: Examining the marked body in postconflict northern Uganda.” *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 8.2 (2014): 217–234.

dinner with myself and some good Acholi friends in their nearby village. After we had finished eating, one of other guests leaned over and said, “I see you have brought a woman from the bush with you.” At first I kept quiet, but then asked how she knew this. “We can tell,” was her only answer. When I later asked another Acholi friend about this, he agreed with the woman at the dinner and vaguely explained that there were certain behaviours and body movements they possessed, nuances I was not attuned to. Said one woman, “My heart still skips even if am back home. I know that I will not be killed, but still my heart skips.”

What is it to survive LRA abduction only to return with children who are called rebels, and to forever have your identity tied to the perpetrators who had also made you a mother? To be unable to speak of a past that so pressingly defines the present, because to do so would only increase your vulnerability? Yet it is this very identity that qualifies women for assistance from international organizations, and their children for scholarships from NGOs. It was the specificity of a woman’s victimhood that attracted international researchers like myself, and journalists, writers, documentary makers, photographers, aid workers, religious charities, travellers and a host of other parties to do their work. It was this same specificity of their victimhood that led to the women’s social exclusion. How does one live with being labelled a victim and perpetrator at once?

I first went to northern Uganda to work with human rights activists on documenting violations, and exploring justice alternatives, including amnesty. It struck me that while we as international scholars, human rights activists and aid workers were focused on debating which justice mechanisms were most appropriate for redressing violence, persons affected by war were learning to navigate a complicated and fraught social landscape to work out who was responsible for what and why. All of this was done in coded and scripted ways I did not understand. In my interviews with displaced persons in 2004 and 2005, I asked rather naively, “Do you forgive those who came back?” in the hopes of learning more about the claim that amnesty is part of Acholi culture. I did not fully understand the rote answer given by nearly everyone – “Yes, we forgive them, they are our children!” – was a politically manufactured one, scripted by Acholi religious leaders and cultural elders as a mechanism for pushing for a government amnesty that would enable them to come back, sending a message to the rebels they would be welcomed without repercussions. Forgiveness began to sound like an empty word as I continued to encounter bitterness buried in the hearts of people who had endured so much loss at the hands of rebels they could not name, for the rebels had come in the night and from regions they did not know. And so someone, anyone, who was once part of the LRA, now became that person who had terrorized them in the night. This sometimes played out with tragic irony. Such was the experience of one woman beaten by a Ugandan soldier for being a “mother to a rebel.” As he beat her and her child, the soldier told her that the rebels had killed his parents. Yet the rebels had also killed the young mother’s parents before they abducted her and fathered the child she carried.<sup>4</sup> She remained quiet as

<sup>4</sup> I wrote about this encounter in Erin Baines “Spirits and social reconstruction after mass violence: Rethinking transitional justice.” *African Affairs* 109.436 (2010): 409–430.

he beat her, pleading only for him to understand that it was not her choice. There are no forums for talking about life in the bush, only amnesty cards that can be held up to say, “Look, I have been forgiven” – but forgiven for what?

Even the big people point fingers at your back that so and so has returned from the bush. I didn’t choose to go in the bush. The sufferings I have gone through, if you still point fingers at my back, reminds me of the past. Therefore if there is still finger pointing then there is still war.

This book explores how and why women were implicated in the violence they endured as forced wives, and how they navigate this ambiguous status between victim and perpetrators on their return. It further considers the implications of failing to recognize the complexity of victimhood after mass violence in mechanisms designed to facilitate transitional justice. As the women quoted above suggests, if there is still finger pointing, then “there is still war”: communities remain fragmented, divided over questions of who is responsible and for what. Whose stories are told about the war, and whose remain silenced? There is a distinct lack of knowledge of daily life inside the LRA, the meaning of the difficult ethical choices young persons took to survive, and of their struggle to live together again with communities in northern Uganda.

What does it mean to survive mass violence? What is it to remake a life and a community after it? These are not questions one can simply pose to another. I have come to understand that processes of social repair takes place in the daily exchanges of persons within the north, exchanges such as the measured reaction to a raised voice; the way a child plays; or, how one’s body moves at a social gathering. Yet these were all clues not readily available to me at the start, someone who didn’t know the language, someone “outside of culture.”<sup>5</sup> To explore these complexities, I had to first learn to listen to what is not said and what is not obvious. In a reflection of his own research in northern Uganda, anthropologist Sverker Finnström describes this work as a long process of learning, a collection of secrets slowly revealed over time, and in nonlinear and often unexpected ways.<sup>6</sup> It was through the interaction of the researcher, seeking to learn secrets, and the research subject, seeking to keep them, that we should critically read the knowledge produced about war.

I once asked a humanitarian who had worked with more than 200 survivors in an income generating and awareness raising group if he had ever asked about their past experiences. His answer was simple: “Never. That is their life and their past and that is it.” He kept their secrets by not learning them, aware that too many other aid organizations had repeatedly asked for the same information time and again. In 2005, I had asked a group of 20 young men and women in Anaka, as part of my research on re-integration, to brainstorm the plot of a play on the topic. Within minutes, they congregated and discussed and then suddenly said, “We are ready, let us perform.” The play consisted of aid workers, journalists, scholars, government

<sup>5</sup> Sverker Finnström. “In and out of culture fieldwork in war-torn Uganda.” *Critique of Anthropology* 21.3 (2001): 247–258.

<sup>6</sup> Sverker Finnström. “War stories and troubled peace: Revisiting some secrets of northern Uganda.” *Current Anthropology* 56.S12 (2015): S222–S230.

officials and the military coming to the group one by one and asking the same set of questions. “Date of abduction? Date of return? How old were you? Do you have amnesty. . .” The dramatists then laughed as they continued to act, telling each set of officials the same story of their abduction, but slightly changed each time to respond to what the interviewer had wanted to know. Victimhood – helpless, innocent, injured – became a trope through which the victims reclaimed control over the research process.<sup>7</sup> And so it was apparent, I had to discern why some stories were told while others were, modified or withheld altogether. What I determined to be important might, at best, be entirely redundant in the context of the lives of the storytellers at best, and at worst, detrimental to their safety. There are stories not told to protect you as a researcher from the truth, and to protect those who tell them from you and what you might do with their stories. And so I have begun to appreciate the delicate life of a story, for once you tell it, it no longer belongs to you.<sup>8</sup> This is my own ongoing ethical struggle. These stories never belonged to me in the first place to tell.

Stories – told and retold – are powerful. Some stories erase and deny violence. Others may reveal and resist it. “We tell stories so that we do not die of truth,”<sup>9</sup> but we also tell stories to re-negotiate life, to live. “Generally,” writes Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, “the telling of a story revitalizes the memories of other stories that, upon being heard, activate a reflective process,” which in turn facilitates the negotiation over “what has been lived and its impact,” making it possible to reconstruct and re-signify “experience and the elaboration of meaning.”<sup>10</sup> Stories told about the violence one experiences can help make sense of what happened, and can engage others in the process of making sense of what happened too. In this sense, telling stories involves a negotiation about meaning, life and relationships. The process of storytelling, involves a teller who shares the story and a listener, one who actively receives the lessons departed. The process of telling stories is interactive and productive; it “establishes a common experience between teller and listener, creating a connection between them.”<sup>11</sup> This connection holds potential space in which transformative relations may happen between two people.

Yet the relationship between researcher and researched persons is one that spans, in this case, massive socio-economic and cultural differences. As the writer, I hold authority over the final product. I am also mindful of what Eve Tuck aptly calls “damage centred” research, produced on and about persons in oppressed and

<sup>7</sup> Mats Utas. “Victimcy, girlfriending, soldiering: Tactic agency in a young woman’s social navigation of the Liberian war zone.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 78.2 (2005): 403–430.

<sup>8</sup> Fiona Ross. “An acknowledged failure: Women, voice, violence, and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.” *Localizing transitional justice: Interventions and priorities after mass violence* (2010): 69–91.

<sup>9</sup> Antjie Krog, Nosisi Mpolweni, and Kopano Ratele. “There was this goat.” *Investigating the Truth Commission testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile. University of KwaZulu Natal, África do Sul* (2009).

<sup>10</sup> Pilar Riaño-Alcalá. *Dwellers of memory: Youth and violence in Medellín, Colombia*. Vol. 1. (Transaction Publishers, 2011): 16–17.

<sup>11</sup> JoAnne Banks-Wallace. “Talk that talk: Storytelling and analysis rooted in African American oral tradition.” *Qualitative Health Research* 12.3 (2002): 411.

marginal spaces. Such work documents the negative aspects of people's lives, and occludes their agency, desires and choices.<sup>12</sup>

Sverker Finnström suggests a way forward, "If the telling of war and other things . . . is steeped in relations of power that ultimately will define how data are crafted and edited, an anthropological ambition must be to find ways to account for the agency of the protagonist of the story, or the storyteller herself."<sup>13</sup> So it is through the work of stories of survival and of reclamation of the self that the political subject in the history of the LRA and war in northern Uganda appears. Recognizing women as political agents in wartime is all the more important in the face of Western scholarship and activism that render its protagonists speechless, and confines them to victimhood. I conceptualize agency within settings of coercion as more than merely a survival tactic, but as including moments of the political, defined as the drawing of boundaries between what it means to be a human being or not, and in the ongoing process of negotiating personhood. The following excerpt from one women's life story is illustrative:

You were not allowed to reject any man, not even if he was very old!  
 However much you hated him, there was nothing you could do to express your anger. So you would keep it buried in your heart. You hate him but you do not express your anger. In your heart you remember the anger, but on the outside, you laugh, you smile at him.

For this woman, to bury anger in the heart (*kano kiniga i cwiny*) was one of the ways she retained her sense of self within the bush, where she was forced to comply with orders to marry a male commander she loathed. The political is found in the recall of refusal. She may have surrendered her body to the LRA, but she did not yield her heart, a symbolic part of one's body in Acholi, which reveals the essence and character of a person. To me, this woman's statement makes a subtle but important distinction between complicity, survival and political agency. She might have accepted becoming a wife to survive, and even smiled and laughed with him, but in the act of burying anger, she retained a sense of *presence*. In her brief reflection, we are led into the complicated ethical space in which women lived in the LRA, and sought to remain human beings. To bury one's anger also becomes a metaphor for the strategies women employ on return: to remain silent in the face of accusation, and to mask their identity and those of their children.

At the same time, in any community trying to come to terms with violence, telling stories of anger buried in the heart has the potential to open dialogue about who is responsible for what happened, and why. Without such stories located in the "grey zones," questions of accountability will remain the work of courts and professionals, and not be assumed by those who must live together again. Women who participated in this research project stated that they did so to address the misperceptions of what happened inside the LRA. They are tired of being called prostitutes, insane and the mothers of rebel children. Others lament the loss of mechanisms with which to

<sup>12</sup> Eve Tuck. "Suspending damage: A letter to communities." *Harvard Educational Review* 79.3 (2009): 409–428.

<sup>13</sup> Finnström. "War stories and troubled peace."



convey their experiences, such as *wang-o*, stories told around the fireside in Acholi familial settings to promote social cohesion and resolve conflicts. Most stated that it was too painful to speak out loud anyhow. Still, they want the next generation to understand what happened there, in the “bush.” Remarkd one participant:

Since I grew up in the bush, I do not have the capacity to teach my children in the way Acholi children learned in the homestead near the fireplace [*wang-o*] before the war. What I have narrated in my story is equivalent to the teachings at the fireplace and my children will read it for themselves. I will keep this book very well the day it reaches my hands.

I hope this book might make a modest contribution to an archive of what is currently overlooked in the search for international justice: women’s political agency in wartime. I have done my best to document these stories in ways that can be taken up around a fireside – providing each woman involved in the project a copy of their own life story. I am grateful for the teachings they offer us into the making of wartime violence and the remaking of communities after it.

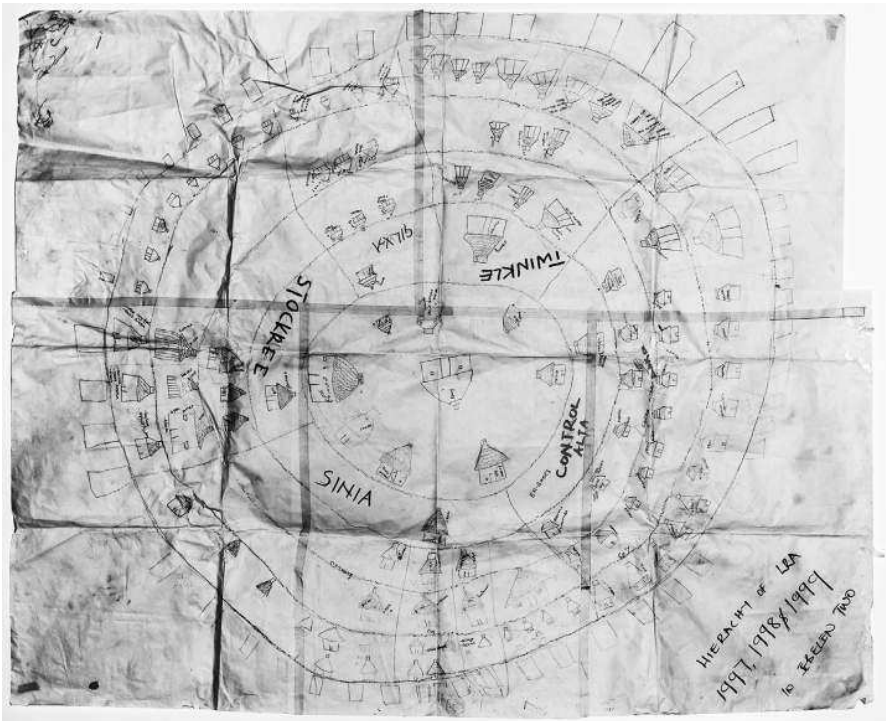


FIGURE 1. Representation of LRA hierarchy of command 1997–1999.

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In loving memory of Samantha J. Walker.

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