Unhappy performatives of statehood: Staging incompatible narratives of Eritrea through academic conferences

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UNHAPPY PERFORMATIVES OF STATEHOOD: STAGING INCOMPATIBLE NARRATIVES OF ERITREA THROUGH ACADEMIC CONFERENCES

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Author Info:
Dr Tanja R. Müller
Reader in Development Studies
Global Development Institute
University of Manchester
Arthur Lewis Building
Oxford Road
Manchester M13 9PL
UK
Tanja.mueller@manchester.ac.uk

Abstract: In this article I analyze two conferences held on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Eritrean independence as "unhappy performatives" in J. L. Austin's sense. My analysis is based on my personal and emotional investment in both conferences -- a position that gave me a unique understanding. Using a performance studies lens offers new ways of understanding the dynamics of the scholarship about international politics thereby contributing to wider debates on how performances of truths often replace truth.
UNHAPPY PERFORMATIVES OF STATEHOOD: STAGING INCOMPATIBLE NARRATIVES OF ERITREA IN ACADEMIC CONFERENCES

Introduction

Much has been written about performing and enacting national narratives, their rituals, and the hyperbole often associated with them (Elgenius 2011; McCrone and McPherson 2009). Some of the most powerful performances are in states or quasi-states that owe their existence to wars for national liberation, independence struggles, and/or revolutionary movements (see for example McConnell 2016; N’Guessan et al. 2017). As nations are ultimately "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983), performances of statehood advance nationalist ends of inclusion (or exclusion) based on national narratives and state-founding myths (see for example Breed 2008 for Rwanda).

In Eritrea, the first African state to achieve de-facto independence in 1991 (de jure, 1993) following a war of secession against Ethiopia, performing narratives of statehood was a two-fold endeavor: First, theatrically staged ceremonies on independence day and other important holidays such as Martyrs’ Day commemorating those who died in the war for independence. Over time, these ritualized celebrations legitimized an increasingly authoritarian government (Woldemikael 2009). Second,
younger citizens were required to honor those who fought in the war for independence by performing national service. But over time, national service became what Bernal (2014) called ‘sacrificial citizenship’, a seemingly never ending duty to the nation. Soon enough the rate of people leaving Eritrea became one of the world's highest per capita (Kibreab 2017).¹

This situation results in two diametrically opposed discourses on Eritrean statehood, one advocated by a powerful human rights lobby mainly outside the country, and one propagated by the Eritrean government and its supporters inside and outside the country.²

In addition to more conventional ways, both sides used academic conferences convened marking the 25th anniversary of Eritrean independence in 2016 to perform contrasting narratives of statehood. At these conferences, the core objective of debating theories and evidence with the ultimate aim of arriving at some sort of truth, or at least a convincing interpretation of available data and evidence, was replaced by quasi theatrical performances aimed at very different audiences.

The two contrasting conferences in Geneva and Asmara, were not conferences in the common sense of the word. They were performances of Eritrean narratives of statehood with objectives far removed from the usual
meaning of the term "conference." Although on the face of it, these conferences were scholarly events, in fact they were performatives intended to produce future actions. Such performatives matter because they influence political solutions that impact peoples' lives in tangible ways. Both Eritrean conferences failed, they were: they were "unhappy performatives" (Austin 1962:14).

Using a performance studies to analyze how the Eritrean silver jubilee was staged at conferences offers a new way of understanding international politics.

**Putting out the word: let's have a conference**

My story with both conferences began in Geneva in July 2015. I was visiting a friend when I received an announcement that for the first time since July 2001 an International Conference on Eritrean Studies (ICES 2016) was to be held in Asmara, the Eritrean capital, in July 2016 to celebrate 25 years of Eritrean independence. Titled *Eritrean Studies: The Way Forward*, it was meant to revive scholarly discussion on Eritrea and help create global networks of researchers working on Eritrean issues.

As I read the call for abstracts, I felt excited and wary at the same time as memories flew past of the July 2001 conference. It was a time of open debate and a future full of promise after a vicious border war with
Ethiopia had ended (see Negash and Tronvoll 2000). Various new independent print media outlets had sprung up, and the conference itself brought together scholars from abroad as well as established and promising young academics from the University of Asmara (UoA). Controversial issues were debated in a generally open and frank manner, and the various attempts by members of the Eritrean government and/or the ruling party, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), to control the discourse did not hinder the free exchange of ideas. The crackdown on open debate and dissent that followed a few months later, in September 2001, put an end to all that, ushering in a dark era resulting in the eventual closing of Asmara University in 2006 (see Müller 2008).

At the time of the 2001 conference, I was ending a year based at the UoA, and many of my former students who were at that conference have since gone into exile and are now part of the diaspora. Only a few chose to remain or return from study abroad (Müller 2018b). Thinking back to the 2001 conference, I wondered if free debate would be possible at the 2016 conference in Asmara. It was a time when Eritrea more generally seemed to open up again to the outside world – albeit in a very controlled way and from a low base (Müller 2012).
A few weeks later, while I was still contemplating what abstract to submit, I was thrilled to find a second call for papers in my inbox. Sent via a friend, this was issued by a well-known Eritrean human rights activist based in Geneva. Titled *Eritrea at Silver Jubilee: Stocktaking on the nation-building experience of a 'newly independent African country* it solicited papers for a conference in May 2016 (a couple of days before the independence celebrations on 24 May). This second conference assumed that Eritrea had the worst government in its entire history. Thus in contrast to the call for abstracts that came from Asmara, neutral in tone and soliciting papers based on academic merit, the organizers of the opposition conference, as I shall refer to it, clearly stated from the outset that they meant the meeting to be a forum that discussed the slide into oppression; it had an advocacy function—not least due to being held in Geneva, the city where a few weeks later the second report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COI) would pronounce Eritrean government guilty of crimes against humanity.

I, in retrospect rather naïvely, thought those two conferences provided the perfect opportunity to put into practice one of my ambitions in relation to Eritrean Studies: bridging the divide between those who
unquestioningly support a government that while being driven by a laudable developmental mission also has a lot to answer for in curtailing freedoms versus those who vehemently oppose it and in doing so make use of often questionable propaganda and intimidation tactics that are in essence similar to tactics used by supporters of the government. I should have known that nuances would not be welcome on either side, and that instrumentalization-tactics are the norm when it comes to Eritrea. But I was determined to present the same paper at both conferences and see what might unfold.

One core theme both camps agree on is the central role of citizenship obligations, most materially manifest in the national service requirements that are indefinite in duration (see Kibreab 2017). While official statements see national service and other mobilization campaigns as the process by which the liberation struggle is passed on to generations of Eritreans, the opposition regards obligatory service as a key tool of oppression, some equating it to slave labor. Slave labor-like practices are the main reason behind the high acceptance rate of Eritrean asylum seekers in Western countries (in stark contrast to refugees from other African nations).

To both conferences I submitted an abstract for a paper on changing patterns of political space in Eritrea.
The themes in my paper go to the core of the national service conundrum: the contradictions inherent in the struggles to combine overbearing national obligations that most people accept in principle but not in the way they are being enforced with personal aspirations. My paper analyzes these contradictions in relation to concrete life histories of graduates from the former University of Asmara, all of whom are committed to national development. Some are still in Eritrea, but most have left. Their life trajectories show in concrete detail what it means to be Eritrean and global at the same time. My paper thus not only puts the contemporary movement out of Eritrea into a wider perspective, it also argues that Eritrea is not on the continuous downward spiral that the opposition conference's framing suggested. In fact, things have opened up in the last few years in a number of ways. That the 2016 Asmara conference took place at all is a clear sign of progress (the paper is published as Müller 2018b).

Initially when I made my two submissions, my intention was only to attend if my paper was accepted by both conferences. For the Asmara conference, I had in addition with other colleagues put together a panel on foreign policy in the Horn of Africa in which I was to speak on Eritrean foreign policy, but that was the less
important aspect of my involvement in the conference. I heard nothing from either event for a long time, and to be honest did not expect to hear from the opposition conference organizers, because in my submission I questioned the dictum in the call for papers that stated we already knew the answer: Eritrea’s trajectory was one of disaster. But then it came, the invitation to Geneva, and with it a program that on the face of it seemed full of interesting contributions.

Shortly after, my paper for the Asmara conference was rejected on "scientific grounds," giving me a first indication of the limitations of discussion at the Asmara conference. Our foreign policy panel and my paper within it were approved, no doubt because the paper included a critical account of Ethiopian foreign policy in the Horn (see Müller 2018). Thus here was my first dilemma: should I decline to travel to Asmara, as I had originally planned? Going would mean accepting that certain issues were off the table. Or was my hope for openness wishful thinking? How could I have imagined one could speak freely about a topic as sensitive as political space 15 years after the last attempt to do so within Eritrea landed many people in prison or forced them into exile? But when debating these issues with some of those who would have featured in my rejected paper, they were
clear: of course I had to go. The same answer came from colleagues from inside Eritrea who had often commented in the past how valuable people like me were -- critical but from, as one phrased it "an insider’s view that understands the rationale behind many government policies." When it also became clear that a number of colleagues from all over the world I had not seen since the 2001 Asmara conference were to attend, I threw my doubts out the window. But first things first, July was still a long way off, and the Geneva conference loomed much nearer on the horizon.

The ‘Eritrean Silver Jubilee’ conference in Geneva – performing stocktaking of a dictatorship

When I mentioned that I was going to the Geneva opposition conference, most of my Eritrea-related contacts looked at me in disbelief. Perhaps they understood far more clearly than I that there had to be reasons why I was invited which had little to do with my paper. When some joked I needed police protection, I felt vindicated because I believed the conference was meant to build bridges, not burn them. Also, some valued colleagues were going to attend, even if we ended up on different sides of the deep divide within Eritrean Studies. I told the organizer beforehand that I would
leave the event if discussions turned into personal insults. In fact, throughout the two-day conference, debates and discussions were on topic and well-mannered. Socially, any outsider seeing the participants sitting together in a Geneva restaurant would think we were old friends. It not only looked but felt like that, which made it even harder for me to accept that some of the people I shared food, wine, and laughter with at night during the day showed a ruthless determination to use all the rhetorical means at their disposal to demolish any nuanced analysis of Eritrea.

During the conference, it became quickly obvious that the participants were carefully-selected, like-minded people with a clear agenda. They were on one side, me on the other. The conference was a small event of never more than around 30 people at any one time. It opened with a talk by a Swiss parliament member who repeated the major allegations of the COI report. He did not mention how deeply flawed the report is; he took for granted its often unsubstantiated claims. His remarks set the tone for things to come, a bad sign for a conference claiming to adhere to academic rigor. The next talk was scheduled to be by an opposition activist who had recently left Eritrea, but he could not attend due to visa issues. Thus, his talk was replaced with a panel
that presented the assumptions behind the conference: that Eritrea had a post-independence government worse than any in its history. At the very last minute, I was asked to join the panel of three. I was the dissenting voice, not only questioning the assumption but also speaking in favor of renewed EU engagement with Eritrea and the abolition of UN sanctions. The conference convener moderated the panel diluting what I had to say, misinterpreting me in multiple ways without giving me room to object. I increasingly realized that I had been brought in as part of a stage-managed process.

Similar management characterized the second conference day when we presented our pre-submitted papers. This should not have surprised me. The conference was organized by a human rights lawyer who knew very well how to get his point across. In fact, the conference felt like sitting in a court judging the last 25 years of Eritrean history. A telling encounter came in one of the breaks when somebody who had not heard my presentation introduced herself as working for the COI-team. She had heard my name and asked if the COI-team interviewed me. When I answered I had never been contacted by the COI-team, and would have been surprised if I had, she realized who I was. Her moment of embarrassment said it all: the COI-team only interviewed people who were part
of a known group of human rights advocates in line with its message; the team did not engage with those known to have divergent views.

Thus here I was at an event where I was officially introduced as a valuable participant in order to "present a range of opinions," but to the invited listeners it was made clear that in fact the "truth" about Eritrea was that it was ruled by a vicious dictatorship. How unfortunate that I did not fully grasp that yet. It was very skillfully staged. I do value the work that some of my fellow presenters spoke of, and of course there are multiple human rights issues that need addressing in Eritrea. I also like most of them as people. I thus found myself in an increasingly paranoid place, being used by a group with whom I share common interests. It felt like being in Eritrea, where conversations with government officials can consist of being berated for knowing nothing in the same breath as one is being commended for one’s good work on Eritrea.

The end of the conference made me feel even more uneasy. In his closing speech, the convener thanked the "funders who do not want to be acknowledged at this point in time" and promised a speedy conference report, as those funders had demanded. Not prone to follow conspiracy theories, I nevertheless wondered about those
funders. The accusation of omnipresent Eritrean state surveillance networks did not convince me. I have no doubt those networks exist and that they threaten people, but so do networks of opposition actors who are not less threatening. I have personally received threatening calls on my mobile from opposition people (see Müller 2015a). The conference report came soon. The fact that one participant, me, put forward a different point of view, was nowhere to be found. The report contained a photo of the presenters with me next to the others even if my point of view had been erased. 6 I left Geneva with very mixed feelings. When I embraced a former Eritrean colleague who now lives in forced exile and we parted with the words, "Maybe next time in Asmara," I felt the sadness of the whole situation descend upon me. "Next time in Asmara" will only come with regime change. But I knew too many people for whom a regime change would not solve their predicament. I have never been an advocate for regime change brought about by outside forces. I know and highly respect many Eritreans who carry out their mandate in government ministries or as party functionaries with courage and dedication. Had attending the conference put me on the wrong side of the fence once and for all, making me an accomplice in an opposition agenda I had little sympathy for? Had my attendance added
me inadvertently to the persona non grata list of those refused entry into Eritrea? And, most importantly, as I see my ethical responsibility towards those whose life stories populate my research, and who engage with me because I refuse to take sides but "write what your research tells you" as one of them put it, what would those people say if I were barred? Would they feel betrayed because I had indirectly used our encounters to foster a political agenda, even if that was not my intention?

I needed not to have worried too much about being suddenly embraced by the opposition. Shortly after the Geneva conference, I received a phone-call from a Swiss journalist who wanted to understand what was happening. I was recommended as a quasi "government spokesperson" - a phrase we both laughed off in a subsequent background conversation about Eritrea, and that - apart from myself - nobody could object more to than the Eritrean government itself.

The Asmara conference - performing an academic conference (sort of)

In many ways the Asmara conference could not have been more different from the Geneva one. It was advertised as a major public event with its own website
(the Geneva event was hard to find anywhere on the internet), and was impressive in terms of size and organization, with 130 papers and an audience of more than 400 at peak times, including many government officials, foreign embassy staff, and development partners mainly from UN agencies.

In line with most African governments and certainly those who fall into the post-liberation category and have a developmentalist outlook, the conference was based on the dictum that research is only valuable if it has a clear link to wider societal problems and their solutions — something to be applauded in principle.

But once I was in Asmara and not dissimilar from the opposition conference, the wider rationale was clearly spelled out. The conference had as its main objective overcoming the polarization of scholarship on Eritrea as advanced by those scholars who do not pay enough attention to the particular conditions of Eritrea. It would do so by providing "truth based on facts," by presenting the "real" Eritrea to the outside world. One could see the conference as a public relations exercise aimed at countering the negative narratives about Eritrea leaving little room for critical debate. The trope in this framing was the "so-called expert" — an academic from outside who makes claims to knowledge that
only an Eritrean could have, but whose work is (falsely and for political reasons or as a form of knowledge imperialism) seen as authoritative. A number of those who were my fellow presenters in Geneva would clearly fall into that category as would a number present in Asmara. The line between the good "international scholar" and the bad "so-called expert" has always been thin, and one could easily mutate from one to the other. The framing of the Asmara conference suggested that almost by definition, if one questioned the tightly framed boundaries of allowable criticism set not by the academic committee that was the visible face of the conference organization but by government and party, one was in danger of being put into the "so-called expert" group.

Many positives can be said about the 2016 Asmara conference, not least that it tried to bridge the gap between academic research and its applications. It also gave young (and not so young) Eritrean researchers a platform to present their often excellent work -- at least the work that dealt with uncontroversial, development centered topics that focused on achievements and future challenges. But that was as far as critique was welcomed: as an analysis why progress had not quite occurred as planned (yet).
Our panel on foreign policy in the Horn proved to be one of the most critical ones, even if in the discussion some of us were put into our place by the President’s spokesperson Yemane Gebreab, who questioned the validity of our panel because no Eritrean or indeed African scholar participated in it. I found those remarks infuriating if not unexpected, as not only did I explain at the outset that we had actively recruited scholars from Eritrea and the Horn who felt the topic too treacherous to agree to participate, but also because it was the conference organizers themselves, after all, who had asked us to put two more papers by European scholars on our panel. But the remark set the tone throughout: critical research could be ignored if presented by people who could not possibly understand the "native" viewpoint, people who were "so-called" experts.

Local researchers know better than to touch on truly controversial issues, as one could never be sure of future repercussions. So at the first major international conference on Eritrean Studies in 15 years, the issue at the core of life for many Eritreans that needs a political and policy solution -- national service and citizenship obligations -- was astonishingly absent or talked down as of little significance. A paper on representations that interrogated why so many Eritreans
leave the country by a member of the diaspora was one of the very few that mentioned national service at all, but even this cautionary mention was brushed aside not least by a staunch diaspora-PFDJ-supporter in the audience.⁷

To somebody like me, who does believe in development alternatives and who has always been supportive of and sympathetic to the Eritrean government’s developmental agenda, this was a despairing state of affairs. I have repeatedly made the case in the past that narratives about Eritrea are one-sided and partly underpinned by geopolitical dynamics (see for example Müller 2015b). But the same is true of the overarching narrative that the conference tried to enforce and that was repeated with vehemence at its closing session: all is well in Eritrea and the reason it is being "demonized by the West" is due to its focus on self-reliance. The fact that so many of its young people flee to neighboring countries or further is due to trafficking and incitement by the opposition and outside forces. Those countries who grant refugee status to Eritrean asylum seekers are to blame as well.

My paper which had been rejected because the organizers deemed it "lacking scientific quality" had exactly those issues at its core. I wondered how many other papers might have been rejected because they were deemed too controversial or critical. I wondered again if
in some way I had betrayed those whose lives populate the research I could not present. Those who have left Eritrea in often complicated personal struggles were written out of history throughout the conference as an aberration of minor significance in the wider scheme of things. Did I make the wrong decision to attend the conference after the paper I really wanted to present was rejected?

One of Eritrea’s symbols is the tortoise, meant to signify the path of the ruling party, moving often very slowly but eventually reaching its destination. Maybe I should take a more tortoise-like view? And there were many encouraging signs that vindicated me being here – in addition to the joyful re-connection and frank conversations with many former colleagues from the former University of Asmara who were now teaching at various new colleges. A number of young Eritrean students and scholars told me in private how much they appreciated what I and some of my colleagues were doing. How it astonished them when we spoke back to Yemane Gebreab in public to see this was actually possible. At this level of personal encounter I was convinced my decision to attend was right.

One-to-one private conversations with government or party officials (which are as everywhere more frank than public ones) proved less uplifting. When officials I have
sometimes known for decades see it fit to end discussions on which one disagrees with a version of the dictum "There are things you do not know, thus you have to trust me that what you say is wrong" – they are likely right at least with the first part of the statement. But social science research is not about treating official statements as truth (and be regarded as a traitor if one questions them), it is about interrogation, debate, and analysis. And when I compare narratives of ordinary Eritreans with how their lives are being presented in official discourse, there are things I can comment on from a unique vantage point. But if nobody wants to hear them, or if one cannot even agree to disagree with people who I highly respect otherwise and who claim to highly respect my work, what value does engagement have?

In the Asmara conference, it was the issues that came up in private conversations that were crowded out, in favor of contributions from stage-managed participants. But who were those contributions stage-managed for? While the conference was framed around "telling the truth about Eritrea to the outside world," I kept wondering if that world actually noticed the conference at all. Maybe the conference was really a show for internal consumption, an event to demonstrate not least to college students and staff that things were opening up, that a future of
opportunities lay ahead. While many international media outlets visited Eritrea in the 12 months preceding the conference, the conference itself was devoid of foreign media presence and it was left to the state-owned broadcaster ERI-TV to run lengthy features on each of the conference days. Maybe the conference was really meant to re-enforce the "truth" about Eritrea for its educated youth, and in such a context my rejected paper that would have picked up the silent deliberations many of those present grapple with, would indeed have been explosive. It would have brought into the open the question that dominates the thinking of a majority of youth: staying or leaving, and who see leaving not as unpatriotic and selfish, but as in a tragic way often the only way to lead a fulfilling life while being committed to Eritrea and its development.

Conclusion: Unhappy performatives of 'truth'

Going back to Austin’s distinction between happy and unhappy performatives helps us look behind both conferences and see them as events created with specific audiences and impacts in mind. The ultimate objective to demonstrate "the truth" about Eritrea through a conference turned out to be performances of conferences, or rather performances of incompatible narratives of
Eritrean statehood staged through conference-like events, not conferences per se. With hindsight, they proved to be unhappy performatives because they did not complete what the perlocutionary act of staging a conference intended for either side.

At first sight, both conferences could be evaluated as having achieved their intended objectives, at least in the short term, and thus could be called happy performatives. For the organizers of the Geneva event, the main performative act was to stress -- to an audience of international human rights activists -- the legitimacy of their condemnation of Eritrea as an unhinged dictatorship. But the main representatives of the human rights activists were already involved in compiling the COI report as researchers, thus they did not really need convincing. The organizers might still have felt they succeeded at least in part: The subsequent COI report, released in June 2016, not long after the conference, confirmed that crimes against humanity had been committed -- using the conference as an event that provided proof of "the truth" (Human Rights Council 2016). As a consequence, another UN body considering lifting sanctions against Eritrea recommended leaving them in place -- even though monitors stated clearly that no evidence was found of Eritrea's continued involvement in
Somalia or in support of Islamic groups - the rationale behind sanctions (UNSC 2016; 2017). Of late, following the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia in June 2018 after 18 years of a no-war-no-peace stalemate, the sanctions have been lifted. But even without considering these unexpected political developments, the Geneva conference had little impact on the political and human rights situation in Eritrea, which was one of its stated aims.

In a similar vein, during the Asmara conference one could easily get the impression that it succeeded in demonstrating to foreign participants and, more importantly perhaps, to Eritrean youth in higher education the open exchange of ideas in a battle for "truth" showing them the way to a better future for Eritrea. But then, a few days after the Asmara conference ended, Eritrean reality as it presents itself for most of its citizens caught up with me: A little after midnight, once everybody had finished their work-shift, I was invited to a traditional and elaborate coffee ceremony by a group of young women and a few men in Asmara. They were joyful, giggled, showed around pictures of one of their close friends. The ceremony was in fact held to celebrate this friend, let’s call her Asmeret, and her safe arrival in Germany after a three months journey on the usual,
often dangerous, migrant-track, via Sudan and across the Mediterranean. A photo of Asmeret, smiling into the smartphone camera, was passed around, and the ceremony in her honor was photographed and the pictures sent back to her. I don’t know how many celebrations like this still happen every night in Asmara or other Eritrean settings, I would imagine quite a few: I know numerous parents, siblings, and friends of people who have left, waiting for signs of safe arrival, or trying to dissuade those still with them from making the dangerous journey.

In the narrative of both conferences, people like Asmeret are either absent or appear as a caricature of themselves. Asmeret was not enslaved in national service as the organizers of the Geneva conference would claim, in fact she held down a job in Asmara she enjoyed. She was neither trafficked nor otherwise brainwashed or incited to leave, as government spokespeople commonly assert in relation to those who leave. But she could not see a long-term future for herself in a country where business opportunities and personal ambitions are tightly controlled, and where one never knows when a tightening of the few individual freedoms available will occur. People like Asmeret should be at the center of contemporary debates on Eritrean development and the way forward, not least to counter the almost pathological
obsession among Eritrean youth (in the words of a foreign ambassador to the country) that one needs to get out if one is to have a viable future.

Since the rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea, things have improved in many ways, but the ultimate problem remains: young people in particular, whether part of the privileged higher education cohort or not, see no future for themselves in Eritrea. In essence, the various versions of a complex "truth" that both conferences attempted to provide, turned out to be unhappy performatives. The intention to provide some form of positive change for Eritreans did not happen. The Geneva conference, partly dominated by a similar generation as those in power in Asmara and driven by old grievances, excluded the youth that will determine the future of Eritrea. Their existence was only referred to indirectly through stories of victimhood and suffering. These stories were given as evidence for the "truth" of the nastiness of the current regime. The complex realities of life for youth in Eritrea, the trade-offs made in each individual decision to stay or leave that was the focus of my paper, was largely absent. On the other hand, in Asmara, many youths were present, as presenters as well as audiences, but in an equally choreographed way, not as victims but as beneficiaries of a developmentalist
approach geared towards the "improvement" of Eritrea as a nation through personal sacrifice if needed. And indeed, the numbers of students with scholarships abroad studying for Masters or PhDs have increased, even as the number of those who decide to return to Eritrea upon completion remains low.

Ultimately, the term "conference" used to stage different narratives of Eritrean statehood on the occasion of its 25th anniversary was an unhappy performatif in the same way James Thompson has analyzed unhappy performatives around the conflict in Darfur (Thompson 2014:120-152): a broken promise. Instead of engaging in a proper debate seeking a common way forward, the conferences were used as weapons in a trench war about historical truth and myth between two sides who refuse to engage with each other, and in which those who should be at the center of the future, or "the way forward" as one of the conferences proclaimed, had no voice or stake.

The outcomes of both events -- the Geneva report made available online shortly after, and the proceedings of the Asmara conference which only recently have been published (ICES 2016 Proceedings 2018) -- should be taken with a grain of salt. As my insider’s analysis shows, both conferences failed to engage the core conundrum of
Eritrean politics and life. Neither conference produced expert knowledge upon which wider political decisions could be based.

ENDNOTES

1 Eritrea is the quintessential example of a diasporic state with a large percentage of its population residing outside the country but with strong linkages with and connections to in-country developments (see Iyob 2000).

2 This polarization more generally makes it difficult for those who try to find common ground to make their voices heard, as they are easily being portrayed as betraying either the Eritrean people or supposedly universal human rights. To engage with these issues more generally is beyond the scope of this paper. An overview of positions on both ends of the spectrum can be found on some of the following websites: http://www.shabait.com/; https://www.tesfanews.net/; http://www.asmarino.com/eng; http://www.meskerem.net/;

A visual performance of both strands can be seen in the of late annual demonstrations each year in Geneva when a new report on human rights violation is being released by the UN Human Rights Council. This triggers, on two different days, a pro-Eritrea and anti-Eritrean
government demonstration respectively attended by large numbers of people on each side (see for example

https://www.tesfanews.net/diaspora-eritreans-rally-against-coi-report-geneva/; and

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hc33yBpWGhQ).

3 The call for papers for the Geneva conference can be found at: https://networks.h-net.org/node/7596/discussions/88390/cfp-eritrea-silver-jubilee-stocktaking-nation-building-experience-

4 For a discussion of issues around COI see my blog at: https://tanjarmueller.wordpress.com/2016/06/10/human-rights-as-a-political-tool-eritrea-and-the-crimes-against-humanity-narrative/

5 One of my papers that has been widely and enthusiastically read in Eritrean higher education circles is Müller (2012).

6 In that the conference mirrored well-trodden dynamics of non-dialogue when it comes to Eritrea; for an incident where this became a well-publicised discussion point on social media in which some of those behind the opposition conference played a part, see:

https://zeroanthropology.net/2014/09/20/on-eritrea-cross-talk-without-dialogue/
The paper was presented by Helen Gebregiorgis, “Representations and Storytelling: An investigation of why people are leaving Eritrea.”
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Biographical Details: Tanja R. Müller is Reader in Development Studies at the Global Development Institute and the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, both at the University of Manchester (UK). She has worked for more than twenty years on political dynamics in Eritrea and the Horn of Africa more generally, and published in leading journals in the field. Tanja also works on the theme of representations and performances in humanitarianism and development, with a particular focus on celebrity humanitarianism and global visual politics. Her latest work interrogates performances and practices of citizenship among refugees and migrants who lack formal citizenship rights.