



## A Feminist Political Philosophy of African Diasporic Literature on Gender, Exile, and Belonging

### Abstract

The global phenomenon of forced migration has generated extensive political philosophical scholarship. However, the gendered dimensions of displacement remain conspicuously undertheorized. From Rawls Walzer, Carens, mainstream migration theory has constructed its account of the migrant as an implicitly universal and male subject, rendering the displaced woman philosophically invisible at the moment of her greatest political vulnerability. This paper intervened in that theoretical lacuna by bringing feminist political philosophy into sustained dialogue with third generation African diasporic literature, arguing that the literary imagination of displaced African women constitutes a form of political philosophical knowledge that theory alone cannot produce. From Hannah Arendt, Seyla Benhabib, Iris Marion Young, and Oyèrónkẹ Oyèwùmí, and reading these against Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* (2019), NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013), and Lesley Nneka Arimah's *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* (2017), the paper adopted a feminist literary political philosophical methodology which treated literary texts not as illustrations of theoretical positions but as independent sites of political philosophical reflection capable of articulating what conceptual analysis alone leaves unsaid. The paper found that third generation African diasporic literature exposes the gender-blindness of mainstream migration theory, articulates the intersectional political exclusions specific to displaced African women, and imagines alternative politics of belonging that exceed liberal frameworks of citizenship and rights. These findings advance the field by demonstrating that African diasporic literary imagination is not merely a cultural archive but an epistemically generative philosophical resource. The paper recommended the decolonization of feminist political philosophy as a necessary condition for theorizing African women's diasporic experience adequately, concluding that genuine belonging demands not merely inclusion within existing political frameworks but the fundamental reconceptualization of belonging itself.

**Keywords:** Gendered exile, Feminist political philosophy, African diasporic literature, Politics of belonging, Decolonial feminism

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### Introduction

The twenty-first century is witnessing the largest movement of displaced peoples in recorded human history. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, over 110 million people were forcibly displaced globally by the end of 2023. Women and girls constitute more than half of all displaced populations,

yet they remain the least visible subjects of political philosophical inquiry into migration, displacement, and belonging. They cross borders under conditions of acute vulnerability, exposed to gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, and the compounding indignities of statelessness, arriving into political communities not designed with their specific condition in mind.

*A Feminist Political Philosophy of African Diasporic Literature on Gender, Exile, and Belonging*

The mainstream political philosophy of migration, from Rawls' theory of justice to Walzer's communitarian account of membership to Carens' influential case for open borders, has made significant contributions to understanding migration and state obligations toward displaced persons. What it has not done is ask what difference gender makes to the experience of displacement and the politics of belonging. As Freedman (2015) argues, these frameworks are built around a paradigmatically male experience of persecution and flight that systematically marginalizes the gender-specific forms of violence, vulnerability, and epistemic invisibility constituting the displaced woman's distinctive political condition.

This paper proposes that third generation African diasporic literature constitutes a corrective to this philosophical silence, not as a supplement to political theory but as a form of political philosophical knowledge in its own right. The novels and stories of Maaza Mengiste, NoViolet Bulawayo, Taiye Selasi, and Lesley Nneka Arimah do not merely represent the experiences of displaced African women; they theorize those experiences, naming conditions that political philosophy has left unnamed, articulating forms of exclusion that its conceptual vocabulary has proven inadequate to capture, and imagining political possibilities that its liberal frameworks have foreclosed.

The paper's theoretical architecture draws on four feminist political philosophers deployed in sequence namely: Hannah Arendt's (1951) concept of statelessness, Seyla

Benhabib's (2004) cosmopolitan feminism, Iris Marion Young's (1990) five faces of oppression, and Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's (1997, 2016) decolonial African feminist thought. Each framework names a distinct dimension of the displaced woman's condition, and together they build toward the decolonial argument that genuine belonging requires the fundamental reconceptualization of political philosophy's epistemic foundations.

### Methodology

This paper adopts a feminist literary political philosophical methodology that treats literary texts not as illustrative material appended to theoretical argument but as primary and epistemically independent sites of political philosophical reflection. The methodological premise is that certain forms of political knowledge are produced through narrative, character, voice, and form in ways that conceptual analysis alone cannot replicate, and that the literary imagination of displaced African women generates insights that feminist theory must learn from rather than merely apply to.

The paper draws on four feminist political philosophical frameworks as analytical lenses and they are: Arendt's (1951) theory of statelessness and rightlessness, Benhabib's (2004, 2006) cosmopolitan feminist account of belonging, Young's (1990) structural theory of oppression, and Oyèwùmí's (1997, 2016) decolonial African feminist critique of Western gender categories. These are deployed not as fixed interpretive grids but as frameworks that the literary texts simultaneously illuminate and complicate, each applied

*A Feminist Political Philosophy of African Diasporic Literature on Gender, Exile, and Belonging*

to one of four works of third generation African diasporic literature selected for their philosophical seriousness and engagement with gendered displacement.

The four primary literary texts are Maaiza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* (2019), NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013), and Lesley Nneka Arimah's *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* (2017). These works are read as philosophical texts in their own right, not as data sources or case studies, in keeping with the paper's methodological commitment to the epistemic equality of literary and philosophical modes of inquiry.

### Theoretical Framework

The political philosophy of migration has, for much of its history, proceeded as though gender were either philosophically irrelevant or adequately addressed by frameworks designed without it in mind. This assumption reflects a structural tendency within liberal political philosophy to posit an abstract, disembodied political subject whose apparent universality conceals a highly particular social location: male, formally educated, economically productive, and culturally legible within the terms of the receiving political community. Correcting this requires subjecting those frameworks to a feminist philosophical interrogation that exposes their gendered assumptions and demands their conceptual reconstruction.

#### *Hannah Arendt and the Right to Have Rights*

Hannah Arendt's account of statelessness in *The Origins of*

*Totalitarianism* (1951) remains the most philosophically penetrating analysis of expulsion from the political community that confers rights, recognition, and the possibility of belonging. Arendt's central insight is that the fundamental deprivation of human rights is not the loss of any specific right but the loss of membership in the community within which rights are meaningful. The stateless person is reduced to bare human existence stripped of the membership through which that existence acquires social legibility and normative protection. Purely humanitarian responses are inadequate because they address biological needs while leaving the political condition of rightlessness structurally intact. Gündoğdu (2015) demonstrates that displaced women face a specifically gendered political invisibility compounding their statelessness with the patriarchal structures of both home and host societies, producing what this paper calls gendered rightlessness, a condition more comprehensive than Arendt's original framework fully theorizes.

#### *Seyla Benhabib and Cosmopolitan Feminist Justice*

Seyla Benhabib's cosmopolitan feminism developed in *The Rights of Others* (2004) and *Another Cosmopolitanism* (2006) advances a philosophically sophisticated account of what justice demands of political communities in their treatment of displaced persons. Against the communitarian argument that political communities have the right to determine their own membership criteria, Benhabib argues that cosmopolitan norms of universal human

*A Feminist Political Philosophy of African Diasporic Literature on Gender, Exile, and Belonging*

dignity place genuine constraints on state sovereignty. Her framework exposes the gap between formal legal membership and substantive political belonging, experienced with particular acuity by displaced African women whose legal arrival in a receiving community does not protect them from racialized and gendered exclusions. Rao (2020) argues that Benhabib's account does not adequately account for postcolonial conditions in which the very borders cosmopolitan norms seek to make more permeable are themselves products of colonial cartographies never philosophically reckoned with, establishing the limits within which her normative claims apply and beyond which a decolonial supplement becomes necessary.

***Iris Marion Young and the Five Faces of Oppression***

Iris Marion Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990) provides the most philosophically comprehensive structural account of political oppression within the feminist tradition. Young argues that oppression is irreducibly social and structural, constituted by institutional practices, cultural norms, and social relations through which certain groups are systematically disadvantaged in ways redistribution alone cannot address. Her taxonomy of oppression's five faces; exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, provides analytical precision for identifying the multiple forms of political exclusion intersecting in displaced African women's experience. Ticktin (2021) demonstrates that marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism are structurally

reproduced by the very humanitarian and legal frameworks nominally designed to protect displaced women, a paradox that third generation African diasporic literature confronts with particular philosophical directness.

***Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí and the Decolonial Limit***

Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí's decolonial African feminist thought constitutes the paper's most radical theoretical intervention; the point at which the analytical tools deployed thus far are turned back on themselves. Oyěwùmí's foundational argument in *The Invention of Women* (1997) is that gender as deployed in Western feminist theory is not a universal analytical tool but a specifically European conceptual formation that universalizes Western women's experience by projecting it onto non-Western social formations whose organization of social difference does not map onto Western gender categories. *What Gender Is Not* (2016) extends this critique to the diasporic context, arguing that African women in the diaspora occupy a triply marginalized epistemic position: excluded from Western feminist frameworks, from African nationalist frameworks subordinating gender to anti-colonial politics, and from mainstream migration theory rendering gender philosophically invisible. Ndlovu (2021) argues that third generation African diasporic women writers constitute an epistemic community developing conceptual resources for theorizing belonging and political subjectivity that neither Western feminist philosophy nor African nationalist thought has produced.

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## Findings

The four literary readings below constitute the paper's primary findings. Each applies a feminist political philosophical framework to one literary text, demonstrating how third generation African diasporic fiction theorizes gendered displacement in ways that both instantiate and exceed the philosophical frameworks deployed.

### *Rightlessness and Colonial Displacement: Maaza Mengiste's The Shadow King (2019)*

Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* centers on Ethiopian women who took up arms against Mussolini's fascist invasion of Ethiopia between 1935 and 1941; women whose military participation was systematically erased from official historical memory by both the Italian colonial archive and the Ethiopian nationalist narrative that replaced it. Mengiste stages a philosophical confrontation with the structures of power; colonial, patriarchal, and epistemological, through which human beings are rendered politically invisible even as their bodies remain available for violence, labor, and sacrifice. The Ethiopian women of *The Shadow King* embody Arendtian rightlessness not because they are displaced but because their displacement is accompanied by systematic denial of political recognition; they fight, die, and suffer in a war whose official narratives assign them no political subjectivity. Mengiste's disruption of narrative with photographic captions describing real Ethiopian women whose identities have been lost performs at the level of form

the argument she makes at the level of content; that these women's invisibility was politically produced and its reversal requires a challenge to the epistemic structures through which political visibility is conferred. Thom (2022) argues that *The Shadow King* constitutes a literary theory of gendered colonial rightlessness demanding to be read not merely as historical fiction but as a philosophical intervention resonating directly with the contemporary condition of displaced African women.

### *Borders, Belonging, and Cosmopolitan Failure: NoViolet Bulawayo's We Need New Names (2013)*

NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* traces Darling, a young Zimbabwean girl who migrates from the shantytown of Paradise to Detroit, Michigan, discovering that legal arrival in America does not produce the belonging she imagined. Darling acquires the legal status that Benhabib's cosmopolitan feminism identifies as the threshold of political membership, and finds herself more profoundly unbelonging than she was in the poverty of Paradise. Her experience in Detroit stages the precise failure of cosmopolitan norms: she is legally present but politically marginal, formally included but substantively excluded, her Zimbabwean identity simultaneously rendered invisible by American racial categories and hypervisible by cultural imperialism that marks her speech, body, and memories as perpetually foreign. Darling's relationship to English enacts what Benhabib's framework theorizes but cannot fully capture: that belonging is not merely a legal or political condition but a hermeneutical one.

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*A Feminist Political Philosophy of African Diasporic Literature on Gender, Exile, and Belonging*

Quayson (2021) argues that Bulawayo's linguistic politics demonstrate that the universalism underwriting cosmopolitan feminist arguments is itself a cultural imperialism that the displaced African woman experiences not as liberation but as epistemic displacement.

***Intersectional Oppression and Diasporic Identity: Taiye Selasi's Ghana Must Go (2013)***

Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* distributes its narrative across four continents, tracing the dispersal of the Sai family following its patriarch's professional disgrace. The novel's female characters; Fola, the matriarch holding the family together across geographical dispersal, and her daughters Ama and Taiwo navigating distinct forms of diasporic dislocation, embody Young's five faces of oppression with philosophical force: displaced African women's experience is not a single condition of exclusion but a complex of mutually reinforcing oppressions whose cumulative effect exceeds what any single analytical axis can capture. Young's (1990) framework maps onto *Ghana Must Go* with precision; Fola experiences marginalization and powerlessness, Taiwo's experience adds the face of violence whose aftermath she cannot articulate within available cultural frameworks, and Ama's trajectory adds cultural imperialism. What Selasi adds to Young is the insistence that these five faces are not merely simultaneous but mutually constitutive, each intensifying the conditions under which the others operate. Mirzoeff (2023) argues that Selasi's formal architecture constitutes a philosophical argument about the

irreducibility of diasporic women's experience to any single framework.

***Decolonizing Belonging: Lesley Nneka Arimah's What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky (2017)***

Lesley Nneka Arimah's *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* constructs alternative social realities organized around African relational ontologies and communal epistemologies, demonstrating at the level of literary form that the liberal political philosophical framework is not the universal condition of political life but one historically contingent arrangement whose claim to universality requires philosophical contestation. Oyèwùmí (1997) argues that gender as deployed in Western feminist theory universalizes specifically European experiences, projecting conceptual categories that distort rather than illuminate African social realities. Arimah's speculative imagination enacts this critique formally; her story *Glory*, in which a woman's body becomes the site of a supernatural political negotiation between competing communal claims, cannot be mapped onto the liberal framework of individual rights versus state sovereignty structuring mainstream migration theory. It requires precisely the relational, communal, and spiritually embedded conception of political belonging that Oyèwùmí theorizes and that African philosophical traditions have long articulated. Arndt (2022) argues that Arimah's collection constitutes a decolonial political imagination adequate to African women's epistemic traditions that purely theoretical work has not yet produced.

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## Discussion

The four literary readings converge on a conclusion whose implications for feminist political philosophy, postcolonial ethics, and African literary studies are both original and consequential. Together they establish that third generation African diasporic fiction constitutes an independent and authoritative site of moral and political knowledge production, exposing specific philosophical inadequacies in mainstream migration theory and extending the feminist frameworks deployed to analyze them.

The findings reveal three overarching patterns of theoretical significance. First, gendered rightlessness in the postcolonial African context is irreducibly colonial in its genealogy. Mengiste's text demonstrates that the political invisibility of displaced African women is a structural inheritance of colonial and patriarchal power whose postcolonial persistence demands structural rather than humanitarian remedy, extending Arendt's account of statelessness beyond its original framework by grounding rightlessness in a specifically colonial genealogy that Arendt's European-centered analysis did not theorize.

Second, formal legal belonging does not constitute substantive political belonging for displaced African women, and the cosmopolitan feminist promise of inclusion through rights remains structurally deferred by the racialized

and gendered conditions of receiving communities. Bulawayo's text demonstrates that the hermeneutical dimensions of belonging, the capacity to be understood, recognized, and politically legible within a community, exceed what cosmopolitan rights frameworks can deliver, placing a direct demand on Benhabib's cosmopolitan feminism: that genuine belonging requires the transformation of the cultural and epistemic conditions through which political recognition is conferred.

Third, and most philosophically consequential, genuine belonging for displaced African women requires the decolonization of the feminist political philosophical frameworks through which belonging has been theorized. Arimah's text demonstrates through speculative literary form that the liberal and cosmopolitan frameworks of mainstream migration theory are not universal conditions of political life but historically contingent arrangements whose Eurocentric epistemic foundations distort rather than illuminate African women's political experience, compelling feminist political philosophy to reconstruct its conceptual foundations on grounds adequate to the full range of women's political experience across the postcolonial world.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that third generation African diasporic literature constitutes a philosophically generative corrective to the gender-blindness of mainstream migration theory, not as supplementary illustration but as an epistemically independent form of political philosophical knowledge. The

*A Feminist Political Philosophy of African Diasporic Literature on Gender, Exile, and Belonging*

four literary readings demonstrated this across distinct dimensions of gendered exile and belonging, establishing the mutually constitutive relationship between colonial inheritance, state exclusion, intersectional oppression, and the epistemic inadequacy of liberal frameworks in the face of African women's diasporic experience.

The theoretical contribution of this paper is what it designates feminist literary political philosophy; a methodological orientation treating literary texts as primary sites of political philosophical reflection and insisting on the epistemic equality of literary and philosophical modes of inquiry. The political philosophy of migration has been impoverished by its failure to engage with the political knowledge produced by the literary traditions of those whose displacement it purports to theorize. Correcting this requires the philosophical willingness to learn from literary imagination rather than merely recruit it in service of arguments already made.

What genuine belonging demands, this paper concludes, is threefold: the political recognition of displaced women as full political subjects, not merely humanitarian cases requiring compassionate management but bearers of rights and producers of knowledge whose political subjectivity is unconditional; the structural transformation of the border regimes and political community frameworks through which belonging is currently conferred and withheld, going beyond cosmopolitan reform to challenge the colonial and patriarchal foundations on which those frameworks were built; and the decolonization of feminist political

philosophy itself, the reconstruction of its conceptual foundations on grounds adequate to the full range of women's political experience across the postcolonial world. Third generation African diasporic literature has been performing this decolonial philosophical work for two decades. Political philosophy's most urgent task is not to explain that literature but to learn from it.

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*A Feminist Political Philosophy of African Diasporic Literature on Gender, Exile, and Belonging*

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