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Gender, Class, and Mobility from the 1980s

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Editorial

Gender, Class, and Mobility from the 1980s

Dorothy Takyiakwaa and Faisal Garba

How do gender and class intersect with the experience of mobility? While movement from one geographical location to another and the aspiration to move from one social position to the next are intrinsic to social life, state structures, the market, and related practices of assigning different values and opportunities to groups and individuals view the mobility of poor, ordinary Africans as a problem to be confronted and curbed. For ordinary Africans, the aspiration to move from one social position to the other is impeded by a lack of access to resources and the securitisation of mobility. Yet, these Africans are moving in significant numbers within and beyond the continent. They face difficult conditions both en route to their destinations and in their host societies. Their gender and sexuality as women, men, and sexual and gender minorities play a role in determining the opportunities open to migrants and would-be migrants, the conditions under which they move, the work that they do and the resources available to them to improve their lives. Being gendered as women, men, or LGBTQI+ persons not only affects one's ability to move from one social position to another, but perceptions about gender often (de)limit the aspirations of persons seeking social mobility.

Women have historically been mobile in Africa (Akurang-Parry 2002, 2010; Awumbila 2015; Darkwah 2021). Side by side with female mobility, patriarchal power structures impose expectations of what people gendered as men can do, shaping how certain men can move across places and vertically through the social hierarchy. In a more visceral manner, ongoing conservative mobilisations in some parts of Africa against non-heteronormative ways of life affect the physical movement and opportunities available for LGBTQI+ persons to improve their lives and livelihoods. In order to be safe, LGBTQI+

persons may have to move or restrict their movement. And when they move, access to resources such as healthcare can be daunting. In essence, people move, geographically and socially, and for varied reasons. Aspirations to be mobile and experiences of mobility are not the same for all: they differ significantly along the lines of gender and class.

The normative and hegemonic theorisation of African migration in general, and of the intersection of gender, class, and migration, in particular, in existing literature has proceeded largely along parallel tracks that rarely converge into an integrated analytical framework adequate to African realities. Historically, theories developed in the context of migration to the United States (US) from Mexico and other parts of the Americas were applied to the African experience with little, if any, regard for broader historical contexts or specific migration histories, and for how these shape and are shaped by notions of space, belonging, travel, and accomplishment. The attempt to productively engage with the marginalisation of gender (read women), class, and migration is deduced from the Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), and Gender and Development (GAD) frameworks, as they grappled with women's roles in development processes. Their engagement, however, produced a fundamental sedentarism that implies that women belong to fixed places, households, and communities, thus rendering their mobility exceptional, derivative or threatening to social order (Kanogo 2005). GAD, the most advanced of the three, shifted to gender as an analytical lens, yet treated migration as a welfare concern rather than as a site of class formation. As these frameworks operate through a Weberian stratification lens that privileges individual mobility through formal hierarchies, the complex sites of internal class stratification of the informal economy where most African women work, for example, are theoretically unmapped and invisible to policy. This results in a compounded erasure of African women's movement, which is constitutive of their economic agency and social formation.

Conversely, African feminist theoretical tradition treats African women's mobility as collective and relational rather than individual, as integral to African social life instead of a deviation from it, and as internally differentiated by class, as opposed to uniform across a homogenised category of women. It measures advancement not by formal, market-legible gains alone but also by consciousness, informal economic agency, and genuine transformation of

power relations, treating the criterion for what counts as advancement as itself a site of ongoing political contest and not a settled, technical question. *Feminist Africa* has taken this seriously over its more than two decades of scholarship, from *Intellectual Politics* (2002) to *Thinking Gender Differently, with Inspiration from Africa* (2025).

The tradition has developed through the continued critique of, and course correction to, mainstream development frameworks, predominantly from African feminist intellectual and political movements (Mama 2007; McFadden 1998; Tamale 2020; Tsikata 2016). Taken together, these movements converged on the argument that the institutional conditions of development programming are politically structured to produce and reward individual, measurable, formal-sector social mobility in ways that systematically discount the collective, transformative, and decolonial conceptions of social mobility that African feminist movements have long theorised as indispensable to any reckoning with African women's subordination. The gap between African feminist theoretical tradition and mainstream approaches to African women's advancement is not a gap in empirical knowledge or technical capacity but a political one.

This *Issue* is an intervention that focuses on deeper engagement with the interaction of gender, class, and experiences of mobility, as mediated by various social, economic, geographical, and political factors. Issa Shivji's (2017) conceptualisation of class as a relationship to life-sustaining goods through wage labour and/or survivalist activities among those in employment and the unemployed, who together constitute the working people, is worth considering here. This conception transcends the division of the working class and the lumpenproletariat, given the social interdependence of both groups and the ease with which people move between them. And by gender, we refer to the assignment of social roles, obligations, and expectations based on assumptions about biology with variations across contexts, communities, and social groups. Conceptually, by linking gender with social class in the process and experience of mobility, we foreground gender as mediating mobility (who can move, how they can move, and what their experiences of host societies are, including the opportunities and limitations they encounter) and, in turn, as (re)producing social class. These gendered experiences in host societies consequently determine the social position of migrants. Women relegated to domestic work

in, say, the Gulf have limited opportunities to move up the social ladder from their class position as working people. This does not suggest a linear relationship between the three concepts or their lived experiences; rather, they relate in ways in which one or more, in the context of other factors, may be amplified or hushed.

We draw on African feminisms and feminist decoloniality work to critically analyse concepts such as gender, patriarchy, and their implications, including knowledge production, which has featured strongly in the works of African feminists (Amadiume 1987; Oyěwùmí 1997, 2011). We also draw on the hetero-patriarchal discourse (Woodson and Pabon 2016) from Black feminist thought to further understand gender, patriarchy, migration, and class, and analyse the status of women and other genders. Contributions engage a textured and nuanced debate on the status of women and other genders on the move. The contributions in this volume anchor migration and mobility around gender and how gender intersects with notions and embodiment of social class, race, and other markers of social differentiation (Crenshaw 1991) from the 1980s until now. This *Issue*, therefore, focuses on these developments with a view to imagining possible liberatory and transformative politics around the mobility and (immobility) of working-class women and other social groups whose interests are served by fundamental social transformation.

We read gender, women, and minorities through the scholarship and the subsequent intellectual and activist' shifts occasioned by African feminists in their engagements with the relationship between colonialism, accumulation, and patriarchy. The invention of the Victorian woman, who is supposedly docile, subservient, second class, under men's control, and limited to domestic spaces for reproduction and care roles, was not in keeping with the position of women in Africa before colonial contact. Colonisation superimposed Victorian ideals of womanhood in Africa through education and laws governing the ownership and acquisition of property, thereby entrenching this particular form of patriarchy in an otherwise malleable patriarchal African society (Amadiume 1987; Mama 2011; Oyèrónḳẹ́ 1997, 2011).

With accumulation being a primary driver of colonialism, women's economic exploitation went hand in hand with their oppression. This operated in several ways, key among which were the gendered structures of private

property ownership. This was especially so when colonies were incorporated into Western patriarchal economic systems linked to accumulation and the power of men. These systems brought together colonisers and their local enablers, and dispossessed and proletarianised men lured by the promise of some form of power over others, in this case, women (Rodney 1972), thus resulting in "double colonisation" (Petersen and Rutherford 1986).

African Migration Today: Between Western-Right Mobilisation and Afrophobia in Africa

The current political conditions within which this *Feminist Africa Issue* is being produced are not incidental to its arguments. McKittrick's closing commentary, originally written in 2025, names them directly, such as deportation raids, the calcification of Canadian anti-immigration politics, the suspension of US refugee resettlement programmes, and the systematic dismantling of diversity and equity frameworks in American public institutions. Such developments are not confined to North America but are also present in Europe. Across the European Union, for example, restrictive border externalisation policies have been incorporated through bilateral agreements that transfer the burden of migration control to African states while exempting European governments from the protection obligations those migrants would trigger on European soil (Zanker 2019).

In South Africa, the Afrophobic violence that Burton documents in this *Issue* as a feature of post-apartheid citizenship has intensified amid economic contraction, state failure in service delivery, and the deliberate scapegoating of migrant communities. Neocosmos (2010) describes this as a structural function of neoliberal government and not a spontaneous expression of popular sentiment. Afrophobia in South Africa and other parts of the continent functions as political diversion. Instead of confronting the failures of the postcolonial and the post-apartheid state to transform property relations, create decent work, or provide social security, migrants become scapegoats for broader crises produced by capitalism and neoliberalism. In Canada, this is manifest in the multicultural framework that Thobani (2007) critiques as managing racial difference instead of addressing racism. Recent policies are

increasingly harming racialised migrants, particularly African women, who are already experiencing these effects.

A shared political economy ties together the geographically dispersed events and responses. In the same period that anti-immigration politics have intensified in the Global North, there has been an acceleration in the extraction of resources, land acquisition, and debt-driven structuring in Africa, which has produced conditions of economic displacement. These have resulted in increased migration from Africa while the destinations to which people move have been closed (Rodney 1972; Shivji 2017). While this is not new, it is a manifestation of the relationship between African underdevelopment and Global North accumulation. The first feature in this *Issue* written by Takyiakwaa and Garba traces this process from the colonial period through structural adjustment to the present. Restrictions on migration are presented as protecting the interests of ordinary people, yet the material conditions producing displacement are both unaddressed and reproduced through the trade, debt, and extraction that the anti-migration politicians endorse. For example, gender inclusion in African migration policy is performed at the level of rhetoric while the structural conditions producing women's precarity are preserved at the level of political economy.

Mobility and Africa's Transformation

Against the anti-immigration global political terrain, the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) is both structurally ambitious and limited. Its unique design and promise of improved intra-African mobility and market integration position it to address the colonial fragmentation of Africa's political economy, which is foundational to contemporary migration dynamics. The full implementation of AfCFTA's protocols on the free movement of people would significantly reorder the citizenship apparatuses that are a primary mechanism through which migrant women's exclusion is produced and reproduced, as demonstrated by Burton (this *Issue*) in the case of South Africa. The gap between AfCFTA's liberalisation commitments and the lived experiences of women moving within Africa remains vast. Documentation requirements, border enforcement practices, and labour market restrictions, as well as the

absence of social protection, deepen the precarities of migrants despite trade agreements signed at the continental level.

The gap between policy and reality reflects structural tensions that African feminists have consistently identified. Continental and national governance frameworks incorporate the language of gender equality and mobility while leaving intact the political-economic arrangements that produce structural inequalities (Hassim 2006; Tamale 2020). The AfCFTA, just as WID, WAD, and GAD, approach women as beneficiaries who need assistance rather than political agents whose experiences of gendered, classed, and racialised exclusion should constitute the starting point of policy design. A feminist framing would require not asking how women can be included in existing frameworks but rather what a mobility framework designed from the standpoint of the most excluded women would look like, and whether the current governance, border management, and labour market infrastructure would survive that interrogation. The existing literature and evidence assembled in this *Issue* suggest that it would not survive. The work of African feminist scholarship is to precisely make the case with the theoretical rigour and empirical grounding that political rhetoric alone cannot deliver.

Also, overcoming Afrophobic tendencies requires, among other things, the need for cross-border organising across Africa. Capital already operates across borders, exploiting workers and resources throughout the continent. Communities resisting displacement, environmental destruction, and neoliberal restructuring must build transnational alliances. Pan-African solidarity cannot remain rhetorical; it must be grounded in shared political struggle. Such a struggle will have to confront the contradiction at the heart of African governments' approach to migration. While many states have signed the AfCFTA, very few have ratified protocols guaranteeing free movement for African people. Capital is allowed to move freely, but workers and poor people are criminalised for crossing borders. Challenging Afrophobia therefore also requires demanding freedom of movement and opposing the hardening of borders inherited from colonial rule.

Gender, Class, and Mobility: Looking Across the Decades and Forward

This *Issue* weaves together the state of and experiences at the intersection of gender, class, and mobility in and of Africa. The first contribution, also by the editors, sets up the *Issue* with a careful and critical engagement with the state of the literature, tracing the nature and depth of the theorisation of African mobility (physical and social) and its intersection with gender and class. It establishes the institutional argument for this *Issue* by identifying the problem that the rest of the volume addresses. Mainstream migration theories have failed African women because they were built without African historical formations, colonial political economies or gendered structures of mobility in their foundations. Similarly, WID, WAD, and GAD have failed African women not because they lacked feminist intent but because they inherited a sedentarist framing that treats women's fixity as the norm and their mobility as the deviation, and none could theorise class formation, sexual power, and colonial inheritance simultaneously. Structural adjustment programmes transformed these theoretical failures into material ones by reorganising African economies in ways that transferred the costs of fiscal austerity onto women's unpaid labour. This drove female migration into economies that were being dismantled. African feminists' theorisations have named these failures with precision. Sylvia Tamale, Amina Mama, Pumla Gqola, Shireen Hassim, Patricia McFadden, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie and others, alongside the African Feminist Forum, have collectively produced the decolonial counter-tradition that the field needs. The articles that follow take up the challenge those thinkers have laid. They do not apply migration theory to African women but rather theorise from African women's experiences. They do not treat gender, class, and migration as disaggregated variables but as axes of inequality that are co-produced through specific institutional mechanisms: how African mobility has been theorised, specifically for women; the citizenship apparatus in post-apartheid South Africa; the racialised labour market and childcare infrastructure in Canada; COVID-era disruptions to care and mobility of professional Ghanaian international migrants; and the policy architecture of the African Union, where women's exclusion is reproduced. The contributions in this *Issue* make visible our argument that African women's migration is not a welfare problem to be solved, a labour supply to be exploited, or an exception

to models elsewhere. It is a site of class formation, gendered power dynamics, and colonial continuities that demands theorisations adequate to its complexity.

Olivia Burton's *Coloniality of Citizenship* problematises and complicates the foundational assumption that gender, class, and race compound one another. The feature goes further by identifying the specific institutional architecture through which they are compounded and reproduced in the context of migration governance. Burton shows that South Africa's citizenship apparatus is historically constituted by colonial and apartheid hierarchies that operationalise racial, gendered, and class exclusions through the procedural language of documentation, eligibility, and administrative processes. The coloniality of citizenship, as Burton demonstrates, is not a historical residue visible only in dramatic moments of xenophobic violence; it is reproduced daily through procedural architecture such as documentation requirements at the relief grant office that exclude the undocumented, and queues at the Department of Home Affairs that migrants join knowing that institutional xenophobia makes success unlikely. Burton draws on qualitative interviews with migrant women in Cape Town during the height of South Africa's COVID-19 lockdown to show how the government's pandemic response made legible an already-existing system that had always constructed them as outside the circle of citizenship. The article's application of the coloniality of citizenship, read through Oyèrónkẹ́'s critique of the colonial gender system, crystalises this *Issue*'s argument that the intersection of gender, class, and migration inequality in the African context is not incidental to governance but is structurally produced by citizenship apparatuses constituted through colonial and apartheid hierarchies reproduced by democratic transformations. This opens the question: if citizenship itself is the mechanism of exclusion, what forms of belonging and solidarity emerge from those excluded?

Ola-Lawson and Akanle's feature article responds to this question by relocating the argument to a different migration corridor. Through qualitative interviews with Nigerian women in Canada, they build the empirical evidence and discussion needed to respond to the forms of belonging and solidarity among the excluded. The feature documents what they theorise as a collision of gender orders: the Nigerian patriarchal formation that women carry across the Atlantic and the Canadian liberal feminist institutional framework they encounter on arrival. Neither of the gender orders is adequate to the actual

situation of the migrant women and the cost of navigating both falls almost entirely on the women themselves. By shifting the analysis to intimate, personal experiences, Ola-Lawson and Akanle argue that the collision of gender orders is not incidental to Canadian multiculturalism but structurally produced by it. The migrant women therefore develop class strategies of belonging and solidarity, including transnational motherhood, which distributes the cost of migration transnationally, revealing how the reproductive labour of left-behind African women is foundational to migration. What Ola-Lawson and Akanle add to the collective argument is the demonstration that the coloniality Burton identifies in the South African citizenship apparatus operates with equal force in the Canadian household and labour market, using different mechanisms but producing the same structural outcome. This transnational motherhood is what Miraftab and Huq (2024) call global bantustanisation: production and social reproduction split across borders so left-behind women's unpaid care work subsidises migration elsewhere. This demonstrates the systematic reproduction of racialised, gendered, and class-based inequality through institutions and relationships that present themselves as neutral and progressive.

The cartographic conversation that follows does not offer an empirical case study but asks a prior and more unsettling question: from where do we know what the preceding feature articles have shown us, and how does the location shape what we can see? Christine Vogt-William and Stefan Ouma, in conversation with McKittrick, provide a methodological and epistemological anchoring and theorise a Black sense of place. This is not an identity category but a method of knowing from specific diasporic locations that are both inside and outside the national formations that seek to contain them. When read together with Ola-Lawson and Akanle's account of Nigerian women in Canada, McKittrick's concept elucidates what those women are already doing to refuse the national boundary: knowing from a position that carries both Nigeria and Canada, remaking place through negotiation and self-definition in ways that Canadian multiculturalism cannot theorise. McKittrick insists that the crossroads at which Black womanhood is simultaneously raced, gendered, and classed is a material geography and understanding this requires not the application of fixed frameworks, but the willingness to be open. The conversation also turns the gaze onto the academic space, as McKittrick observes that even within progressive institutions, some anti-racists have larger

offices and get more funding than others. This extends this *Issue*'s critique of colonial knowledge hierarchies. The closing commentary highlights the anti-immigrant politics that make urgent what Takyiakwaa and Garba's feature argue historically: the cartographies of harm are not residues of the past but active in the present and require critical and reconstructive work.

The last feature by Madeleine Wong moves McKittrick's epistemological cartography to ground and documents the agentive remaking of place within the transnational lives of professional Ghanaian migrant women navigating the COVID-19 pandemic across the United Kingdom, the US, and Canada. Using Bourdieu's forms of capital and their feminist revisions, the paper shows that even highly skilled, well-remunerated professional migrant women remain bound by gender role expectations. This is evidence that class privilege mitigates but never fully insulates against structural vulnerability. Read alongside Ola-Lawson and Akanle's account of Nigerian women's migration to Canada, Wong's feature article offers a second diasporic vantage point on how gender persistently structures care and mobility, even where class promises the greatest protection.

The Standpoint by Setrana, Zanker, and Diakite is framed around one question: is a feminist migration agenda politically possible? With a mix of scepticism and vision, they argue that gender inclusion in African migration policy is deliberately designed within a neoliberal framework to require women's presence without their power. They propose policy transformation, an ethics of care that positions migrants as relational and interdependent, and the abolition of the coloniality of borders.

In Conversation titled *"She Cannot Sit Idle": Kinship, Class and Gendered Politics of Women's Mobility,* Wong demonstrates what feminist migration research looks like when it is grounded in the specific epistemological formation of the researcher. She names how matrilineal systems were invisible to Western feminist reviewers, and the class dimensions of skilled African migration ignored by literature that expects Africans to be poor. Wong's conversation together with Setrana, Zanker, and Diakite's Standpoint moves from structural analysis to feminist praxis, from imagining what could be to modelling what is.

The *Issue* closes with three book reviews: Nyabola's *Travelling While Black* by Christian Bruku, Adichie's *Dream Count* by Malaika Patel, and Falola and Yacob-Haliso's *Women in Africa* by Afua Yeboah and Nana-Anna Abaka-Cann. Bruku's review shows that race, class and gender are equally potent axes of mobility and that surveillance begins at home in the bureaucracies of sending states. Yet, foreignness can also function as class privilege in ways that collapse Blackness into economic position. Patel's review of Adichie's *Dream Count* brings these intersectional concerns into fiction where the characters' varied experiences and collective care across class lines map the gendered and racialised costs of migration with intimacy that is often absent in scholarship. Finally, Yeboah and Abaka-Cann's review of Falola and Yacob-Haliso's *Women in Africa* commends the comprehensive continent-wide recovery project for its extraordinary range and decolonial commitment despite the identified gap between intersectionality named and practised. Together, the three reviews were selected to demonstrate that the questions this *Issue* asks of scholarly articles are equally relevant in travel writing, fiction, and textbooks, and to assert that feminist politics of gender, class, and migration is not contained in any single form of knowing.

In sum, through this collection of unique and rich research, we reflect on the intersections of gender, class, and migration, and theorise African women's migration from their own historical formations, epistemological traditions, and lived contradictions. We build on the body of work of *Feminist Africa* and intervene by bringing together African feminist scholarship tools for naming and contesting the ongoing crisis of anti-immigration politics across the world.

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Finally, we celebrate visible and invisible labour of African women, whose resistances and interventions continue to transform the continent.

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Theorising Gender, Class, and Mobility in Africa: Hegemony, Critiques, and Feminist Interventions

Faisal Garba and Dorothy Takyiakwaa

Abstract

Dominant migration scholarship has framed African mobility as an empirical anomaly to be explained through theories developed elsewhere, rather than as a starting point for theorising migration itself. This article argues that feminist development frameworks, including Women in Development, Women and Development, and Gender and Development, reproduce the same error: each is sedentarist, treating stability as the normative condition of women's lives and mobility as a deviation, disruption or exception. More so, historical accounts subsume women's mobility within that of men, even though women have been central to long-distance mobility on the African continent and beyond. The feature article draws on the Guyanese historian and activist, Walter Rodney's critique of colonial political economy, on African feminist theorisations of gender, class, consciousness, and on the Tanzanian legal scholar Issa Shivji's concept of working people as a corrective to class-blind development feminism. The article proposes a decolonial approach that asks not why Africans move, but why their movement has been made to require explanation at all.

Keywords: African feminist theory, gender and mobility, class, decolonial migration theory, Women in Development, Women and Development, Gender and Development

Introduction

As with many aspects of African society, mobility in Africa is often treated as derivative of theories and ways of thinking from elsewhere. Thus, the study of mobility and migration in Africa has essentially followed thinking from locations outside the continent. This notwithstanding, rootedness and, in some cases, the "requirement of mobility" as a way of being, coming of age, and orientation to the world is pervasive in many African societies (Bredeloup 2013). Instead of forming the basis of theorisation that enables us to understand the African condition and the rest of the world, this reality is treated as empirical material to be processed through the mills of theory from elsewhere (Bakewell 2008; de Haas 2010). This reality is treated only as an empirical resource as opposed to the starting point of conceptualisation and theorisation.

Alongside this orientation, this feature centres a feminist critique of migration theory's androcentrism by taking seriously what emerges from treating gender as a fundamental marker of mobility. We refer to migration as the movement across recognised political and administrative boundaries while mobility is the broader category that includes migration but also movement within a territory and across social position. We use both deliberately throughout this article, since separating physical and social mobility analytically obscures how the two are produced by the same structures.

This feature first examines dominant migration theoretical traditions and their disregard for African historical formations, then turns to African conceptions of territory and identity using Rodney's work to theorise migration's relationship to colonial political economy. We then lay out what a decolonial methodology for migration studies requires. This is followed by the gendered history of African women's physical and social mobility, offering a critical genealogy of Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), and Gender and Development (GAD) frameworks, and centres structural adjustment as a case where these theoretical inadequacies had concrete consequences. It closes with African feminists' own theorisations of social mobility. While we situate this *Feminist Africa* Issue's working definition of class within Shivji's (2017) conceptualisation of *working people*, a broad category encompassing those sustained through wage labour and survivalist

activity that cuts across the working class/lumpenproletariat divide, this feature explores what a parallel decolonial shift might mean for theorising gender and mobility.

Dominant Theory and African Migration: Some Historical Background

Ravenstein's (1885) "Laws of Migration" is touted as having inaugurated the systematic study of migration. His thesis that workers move from areas of low incentive to those of higher incentive formed the basis of classical and neoclassical theories of migration. Some of the earliest critiques of classical neoclassical migration theories emerged from structural approaches such as dependency theory. Structuralist theories have, in turn, been eclipsed by network- and actor-based approaches to migration. All these theories emerged as models within disciplines to explain labour movement as aspects of their disciplinary focus. The traction of the various theoretical attempts at explaining migration mirrors the ascendancy and decline of theoretical frameworks within the social sciences (de Haas 2010).

Neoclassical economic theory views migration as driven by the "hidden hand" of the market, directing labour from places of abundant supply and low wages to places of scarce supply and higher wages (Lewis 1954; Harris and Todaro 1970; Todaro and Maruszko 1987). Given that humans are assumed to be inherently motivated to maximise their gains, profit-maximising individuals migrate from low-wage, high-supply "Third World" economies to high-wage "First World" ones, weighing skill level, migration cost, and expected income differentials in the decision to move. The theory's weakness is the lack of clarity on what constitutes "pull factors" versus "push factors" (de Haas 2010). Dual Labour Market Theory shares neoclassical theory's assumption of a wage gap between First and Third World economies, without explaining its origins. However, rather than locating migration in individual calculations, it attributes migration primarily to labour demand in the First World. Industrialised economies divide into primary and secondary sectors. The primary sector offers higher wages, job security, and social status to highly skilled, predominantly national workers who are trained to maintain productivity (Berge and Piore 1980; Massey et al. 1993). The secondary sector offers little

skills requirement, lower pay, and no job security, and this is where migrants predominantly work, since they are more concerned with wages than status, as they see themselves as belonging to the places that they left (Berger and Piore 1980; Massey et al. 1993).

World-systems theory, drawing on Wallerstein, explains migration as another means by which the industrialised Global North extracts material and human resources from the Global South (de Haas 2010; Massey et al. 1993). Proponents of world-systems theory argue that global economic inequality, driven by capitalism's spread into the South in search of new markets, uproots peasants, directing them towards Southern cities and onward to Northern metropoles. People move from South to North as capital moves from North to South. Migration here is a decision constrained by an unequal global economic order. Determinism is the common charge against world-systems theory, and more substantively, it typically omits the everyday struggles, adjustments, and choices ordinary people make in the face of that order. People respond to the structural power, but also navigate and challenge it, covertly and overtly.

Those who decry what they call the overly deterministic character of the foregoing frameworks have advanced meso- and micro-level theories to account for the immediate forces driving migration and the factors that sustain it once initiated. Thus, meso- and micro-level theories of migration accorded considerable importance to social capital, social networks, and a person's subjective inclinations (de Haas 2010). Pioneer migrants are said to create the openings that enable subsequent migrants to move to new destinations. And once there, new migrants rely on the social infrastructures established by pioneer migrants to find accommodation, employment, and avenues for regularising their stay.

Cumulative Causation Theory attributes migration to perceived inequality within a society. People migrate when they see themselves as less economically endowed than those with whom they compare. Once enough people migrate, others follow, until migration begets more migration. These shifts focus away from the inequalities that initiate migration in the first place and arbitrarily treat localised inequality as separable from the national and global inequalities of which it is a specific manifestation (Massey et al. 1993). Closely linked to this is Migration Systems Theory, which holds that once

migration is underway, legal and extra-legal institutions, human smugglers, migrant-rights organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and remittance infrastructure emerge to sustain it (Mabogunje 1970). However, explaining how migration is sustained is not a substitute for why it began—a wholesome account must start from cause, not continuation.

Changing Territory and Identity as the Core of African Migration

Most of the theories (read models) were developed within the context of migration to the United States from Mexico and other parts of the Americas. These theories were applied to the African experience with little, if any, regard for broader histories or specific histories of migration or for how these shape and are shaped by notions of space, belonging, travel, and accomplishment. Data about migration in Africa are often inserted into "finished theories." When the data do not fit, as happens often, an explanation is sought for Africa's exceptionalism while the model remains intact. Writing about this practice in the discipline of economics from which many migration theories were developed, Mkandawire and Soludo (1998) argue that Africa is treated as an exception to established models. Africa's exception is mentioned in footnotes while theory moves on. Many African researchers, aware of the limitations of applying the existing theories (that do not fit the reality they are studying), ritually complain of the problematic nature of deploying such theories, and then, rather curiously, proceed to use them anyway (de Haas 2010).

Obviously, both structuralist explanations and personal subjective frameworks offer useful insights in explaining why people migrate, how they go about migrating, and the ways in which individually experienced collective issues channel movements to certain parts of the world. While meso- and micro-level theories provide useful accounts of the immediate motivations for emigration—how people go about migrating and the micro-level structures that facilitate migration—they downplay the equally important broader political-economic arrangements within which these decisions are made and embedded. Viewing migration solely as a function of inequality within a society overlooks how economic arrangements in the global political economy shape and relate to localised inequalities.

In spite of their insights, all the existing theories that seek to explain human movement in and outside of Africa crucially miss the notions of territoriality held in African societies. They do not pay attention to how local power configurations, global political economy, and local and general histories of a connected world inform the existing patterns and practices of migration by Africans. In using the best of what each of the existing approaches offers, we also address their limitations, historicising the social meaning of territory and belonging decisively in theorising migration in Africa.

Historically, African societies have been a combination of centralised polities, stateless communities, and acephalous formations (Boahen 1966). Centralised polities like the Ashanti, Lemba, Mali, the Ethiopian dynastic states, the Hausa states, and the Zulu kingdom existed side by side with clan-based groups and acephalous institutions. Mali, for example, maintained tributary relations with smaller vassal territories. The vast wealth of the leaders of Mali (known as the Mansa) was made possible by the labour of local commoner classes and tributaries paid by smaller formations in their sphere of influence.

Their ability to exact tributes notwithstanding, the centralised pre-colonial African states had some control over mobility. The existence of other polities that were prepared to incorporate people rendered their hold over migration rather tenuous. The availability of land and the mobile livelihood organisation of many social groups meant that tyrannical rulers easily lost the populace (Herbst 2015). A legacy of this constant migration can be found by looking at the geographical spread of any ethnic group in Africa. There are few ethnic groups whose presence is restricted to any of the present day postcolonial states.

This is not just the legacy of the 1884 Berlin Conference, which carved up Africa among the imperial powers. Although the Conference shaped many of the modern state boundaries, African people's relationship to land and place were more strongly influenced by long histories of mobility and resistance to authoritarian rule. The notion that people naturally belong to a fixed, ancestral homeland was a colonial construct developed to facilitate social control and governance. The creation of so-called "tribes" necessitated tribal areas and the distribution of power organised around new vocabulary of indigeneity

(Mamdani 1998), reaching its extreme in apartheid South Africa's homelands and bantustans. This was central to the racialised control of labour and was successfully mobilised as a political identity in its own right (Mamdani 1998).

This colonial understanding of belonging is not supported by historical work that showed that ethnic origins were secondary to state formation and to economic, military and political relations (Ranger 1983; Vail 1989). Historical evidence shows competition and struggles occurred more within ethnic groups than across them (Lonsdale 1994). Ethnic solidarity and ethnic homelands as exclusive zones of timeless groups were products of colonial policies of control and postcolonial politicking. While ethnic antagonism retains a hold on Africa's popular classes, it is routinely set aside in the context of struggle against employers.

If the fixed territorial and ethnic antagonism dissolves so readily under the pressure of struggle, how has the idea endured? No postcolonial African state, not even the most securitised (such as Ethiopia and South Africa), maintain an impenetrable border. Every pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial hub of commerce and industry in Africa has drawn labour from neighbouring and distant polities (Adepoju 2005, 2008). By the 1700s, under Asante, Ghana's gold and salt mines were melting pots of West Africans. Similarly, the mines of Great Zimbabwe drew people from across Southern and East Africa and parts of North Africa (Boahen 1990). Despite contemporary passport and visa regimes, Africans cross borders without identity verification to go to their farms, workplaces, and homes. Borders remain, in the mental frame of such migrants, symbols of a distant institution (the state) rather than an organising principle of everyday life, and their routine subversion speaks to what passports and visas actually mean to most Africans. This same logic surfaces in African states' recurring complaints of cross-border "infiltration" at elections. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, the doctrine of *Ivoirité* denationalised an estimated 30% of the population and twice barred future president Alassane Ouattara, from candidacy over disputed claims about his origins (Freedom House 2024; Miran-Guyon 2012; Odinkalu 2024). When people classified by the state as "aliens" vote despite legal restriction, their actions demonstrate their conception of territory and belonging, evidence of an enduring historical form of social organisation where simultaneous belonging to a political community is not delimited by social origin. The persistence of this mode of belonging

despite attempts at criminalising it signals its deep rootedness in African society.

This stands in sharp contrast to Europe's *Lebensraum* model of belonging, which is a fusion of territory and blood. Where Africa's land was vast relative to population, Europe was geographically small, overpopulated, and land scarce. Competition over limited territory produced an exclusionary form of belonging, and wars of conquest aimed to expand the frontiers of available land and not to incorporate people. In Africa, the opposite held: wars of conquest primarily aimed to incorporate more people into vast areas of sparsely populated land.

A history that produced a world outlook premised on the normality of people migrating into a polity and *becoming* members of the political community means that migration has to be understood from the fluid nature of identity in Africa, in addition to economic, political, social, and cultural factors at any given point in time. The centrality of migration and mobility to life and livelihood arrangements in Africa is also linked to mode of production, class formation, and class relations across the continent. Walter Rodney's (1972) pathbreaking work, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, demonstrates the role of modes and relations of production in shaping polities, occupational groups, and social differentiation across different stages of Africa's socio-economic trajectory. An outcome of this history is a continuing mobile consciousness around trade, the search for knowledge, religious proselytisation, and lifestyle. This historical normalcy of migration is still present on the continent and evidenced by the fact that the bulk of African mobility happens within the continent. Nonetheless, migration research is predominantly driven by South–North movements. What then explains this dissonance between reality and research focus?

Rodney's work enables us to trace the source of this dissonance to the longue durée of European imperial expansion, whose associated exploitation and profit motive resulted in the subsumption of African economies and knowledge systems into the interests of imperial and colonial powers. To the extent that economic exploitation cuts across all spheres of social structure, imperial and colonial expansion undergirds a political economy of knowledge production and valorisation that reflects economic standing.

Accordingly, a global knowledge inequality emerged as part of European expansionism and is sustained by the contemporary structures of inequality inscribed by imperialism and colonialism. The economically powerful Global North dominates the system of producing and valorising knowledge. The policy imperatives of Northern states drive research agendas through a combination of funding and intellectual orientation. Scholars in the North and those working in the South are drawn to the powerful Northern sites of funding and, in the process, produce knowledge that often extroverts African realities, marginalises the concerns of everyday Africans, and solidifies global inequality by reifying categories, frames, and theories that are routinely applied to African cases.

It is, therefore, rare for migration studies to take inequality seriously, beginning from empire, the colonial moment, neo-colonial arrangements, the neoliberal turn, and the threads of class and racism that bind them. Immediate policy and "crises" undertones dominate instead, which leads to migration being framed through the language of securitisation, humanitarian emergency, or demographic threat, and African mobility is analysed primarily for what it portends for receiving states in the Global North, rather than for what it reveals about African economies, histories, or aspirations in their own right. This treatment reduces African migration to something that affects Europe, North America, or other countries, and worth studying insofar as it explains Northern anxieties about border control, labour markets, or cultural change, but rarely worth studying as a phenomenon meaningful on its own terms, shaped by African actors' own histories, strategies, and futures. Migration studies largely omits capitalism or treats its global dimensions poorly, presenting it instead as an ahistorical given that forecloses any possibility of sublation. The result is the entrenchment of a path of historical dependency handed down from empire, colony, and neo-colony and the era of techno-capitalism.

What Is To Be Done?

While Rodney did not work on what is now termed migration studies, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* offers tools for the critical, intellectually grounded study of mobility. Rodney's (1972) interrogation of the economic, academic, social, religious, cultural, and geopolitical structures of African societies, their

contradictions and possibilities, shows how Europe's exploitative engagement with Africa left legacies still evident in the continent's institutions and its subordinated place in the Northern-dominated global academy. His concept of "technological arrest," the abandonment of indigenous methodologies, which in turn "killed" innovation on the continent, helps explain the empiricist role allocated to African migration scholars in a division of labour where Northern scholars do the conceptual work while African scholars respond to funding calls and the latest moral panic about migrants. To overcome this requires migration studies to take context-based practices of mobility seriously as a starting point rather than an afterthought. For example, rather than accepting the state's arbitrary categorisation of mobile populations as refugees, migrants, or herders, scholarship could instead begin from the relationships among such peoples, and their tensions, solidarities, and shifting identities and then examine the role that state categories play in pre-defining them. The securitisation of migration and the funding attached to it has resulted in a saturation of studies framing West African and Sahelian farmer-herder encounters as "conflict." What scholarship might instead emerge from taking seriously the tenure arrangements, shifting belonging, and state instrumentalisation of identity that these encounters actually involve?

When we take the foregoing seriously, three commitments should follow. First, migration scholarship should begin from the categories mobile populations use to understand themselves, such as solidarity, tension, and shifting belonging, rather than from state-imposed classifications. The farmer-herder literature illustrates the analytical cost of the alternative, foreclosing attention to the tenure regimes and negotiated forms of belonging that a relational approach would reveal. Second, irregularity belongs to the classificatory logic of border regimes, not to the people so labelled. Rather than asking why migrants become irregular, we should ask how border regimes inherited from imperial and colonial territorial ordering produce irregularity as a category at all, turning an ordinary act of movement into a punishable violation. Third, the migration research agenda should treat colonial border-making and its afterlives in passport controls, visa requirements, and the racialised distribution of mobility rights, as analytical markers instead of an unexamined backdrop. None of these commitments requires migration studies to discard the empirical and methodological resources of existing theories;

rather, they require migration studies to stop treating African mobility as data awaiting a theory produced elsewhere.

Women's Physical and Social Mobility

Women have historically been mobile in Africa, with a longue durée of mobility extending into pre-colonial times (Akurang-Parry 2002, 2010; Awumbila 2015; Darkwah 2007, 2021; Desai 2009). Historical accounts of migration have tended to subsume women's mobility within, or make it dependent on, men's migration histories, yet accounts of long-distance trade cast women as central actors. In West Africa, for example, Gracia Clark (1994) and Kate Meagher (2010) show that women traders, before and through colonial rupture, operated across networks spanning hundreds of kilometres, controlling key commodities and accumulating capital that gave them social authority. On the Swahili coast in East Africa, women navigated restrictive mobility controls to build and maintain substantial economic and social agency through trading networks (Strobel 1979). Maasai women have likewise been active participants in pastoral mobility (Hodgson 2001, 2017).

Colonialism did not simply restrict and reorganise African women's mobility but also produced new gendered geographies of opportunity, constraint and survival. Labour migration schemes in particular were designed to mobilise men's labour while immobilising women. In the case of Southern Africa, migrant labour systems produced acute female poverty and household instability in South Africa, Lesotho, and Zimbabwe (Murray 1981; Bolt 2015). Despite this imposed immobility, Zimbabwean women developed increasingly active migration strategies of their own (Bolt 2015). Movement by women disrupted colonial spatial order and women who moved were theorised as aberrations and social problems. In Kenya, for example, Kikuyu women's physical mobility was consistently criminalised by colonial authorities, who saw it as a threat to agricultural productivity and the social order (Kanogo 2005). These accounts show that the regulation of women's movement is a primary mechanism of gender power.

Women's upward mobility within the social hierarchy has been, and continues to be, constrained by gender power dynamics through which social

markers are imposed and structurally made unattainable. Alcinda Honwana (2012) developed the concept of "waithood" to describe the extended liminal period in which young Africans, including women, are suspended between socially recognised markers of adulthood (such as employment, marriage, and establishing an independent household) and the structural conditions that make these markers unattainable. For young African women specifically, marriage remains a primary mechanism of social mobility, yet marriage markets have been restructured by labour migration and changing gender norms, making the timing of marriage increasingly uncertain. Research on young women's livelihoods in Ghana shows how education, mobility, and entrepreneurship function as contingent and uneven strategies rather than guaranteed pathways to upward mobility, thereby challenging linear social mobility narratives (Anyidoho 2020; Anyidoho and Darkwah 2023).

The tensions between theoretical frameworks and lived experience are direct consequences of how social mobility is framed, measured, pursued, and evaluated. Development policies are consistently built on frameworks that are unable to capture how African women understand social mobility, what they aspire to and the trade-offs they make to achieve it. Three tensions arise in theorising African women's social mobilities: agency and structure, collective and individual interests, and formality and informality. Agency–structure captures the tension between framing African women as agents of their own social mobility and framing them as subjects shaped by structural forces. Frameworks such as WAD, which privilege structure, produce "victimology" rendering women's actual strategies invisible. Conversely, frameworks focused solely on individual agency tend towards individualistic methodologies that ignore the structural context of decision-making. Tamale (2020) addresses this with a dialectical framework that treats agency and structure as interdependent, that is, women's agency is shaped by structure, and structure is reproduced and challenged through women's everyday practices.

The collective–individual tension surfaces in how social mobility is measured. Mainstream theory, rooted in Weberian class analysis, frames mobility as an individual movement through social hierarchy. Kabeer's (1999) "resources, agency, achievements" framework and others inspired by it, inherits this same approach, privileging individual rationality and agency to the exclusion of social norms and structural constraints. African feminist

scholarship has consistently challenged this, arguing that social mobility is relational and collective in African societies, where individual welfare is materially inseparable from collective welfare (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994; Nnaemeka 1998). Also, the rationalist actor model's assumptions about selfhood, interests, and social action are rooted in Western liberal and modernist thought that translate poorly into African contexts. Yet, no adequate theoretical framework exists to measure collective mobility, so development policy continues to target individuals while social relations that actually reproduce (im)mobility are unaddressed.

The third is the formality–informality tension: does mobility through the informal economy constitute meaningful social mobility, and how should we theorise such mobility? The majority of African women's economic activity is in the informal sector. It is here that women exercise their economic agency and also face the greatest vulnerability and exclusion from formal social protection (Anyidoho 2020; Darkwah 2007). Accumulation through commercial networks can transform women's social positioning while also reproducing inequalities within those same networks (Meagher 2019). Unequal stratification exists and sharply so within the informal sector. For instance, a market queen operating a large business and employing apprentices occupies a different social position from a street vendor, though both work within the same informal sector. However, Western frameworks, predominantly Weberian, are unable to theorise such internal stratification. These three tensions recur in different configurations within the frameworks discussed below, none of which was originally developed with African women's mobility as its foundational starting point.

Women in Development

WID theories emerged in the 1970s, influenced by Ester Boserup's *Women's Roles in Economic Development*, which argued that women's exclusion from modernisation and economic development required their integration into economic activity to improve productivity. This approach, adopted at the 1975 United Nations World Conference on Women in Mexico, enjoined governments to provide appropriate technology and capital for women's income-generating activities. Despite highlighting the connection between

women's status and livelihoods (Anyidoho 2020; Rai 2011), WID has been critiqued for homogenising women and invisibilising diversity across class, sexuality, education, and other social locations (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). Mohanty (1984) critiqued Western feminism for homogenising the "Third World woman" as a single, monolithic, and powerless object of intervention, rather than recognising her as a subject of her own social location, history, and agency. By positioning African women as objects of intervention, the very structural oppression unleashed by colonial capitalism, labour extraction, and dispossession become invisible (Win 2004).

This pattern persisted under postcolonial governments. Mama (2007, 151) notes that "anti-democratic African governments jumped on to the WID bandwagon in ways that in the end failed to advance more radical and liberatory feminist agendas." WID did not challenge patriarchal structures but just incorporated women into them, thereby increasing women's burdens instead of addressing the structures that produced them (Anyidoho 2020). Moser's (1993) triple gender role framework exemplifies how productivity-focused programmes routinely ignore women's "other labours" and rarely translate into increased autonomy within households or communities (Anyidoho 2020; Razavi and Miller 1995). WID was silent on how colonial labour migration reorganised gender relations. Male circular migration in Southern Africa's mining economies created de facto female-headed households burdened with productive and reproductive labour, yet counted as economically invisible, a legacy persisting into the present. WID's productivity focus could not grasp migration as itself a gendered structure and not just a backdrop.

Women and Development

WAD emerged in the late 1970s, in the dependency and social feminist traditions, as a response to the critiques of WID. WAD posits that the problem of development is not women's exclusion, but the nature of development itself, which is capitalist and exploits both women and men in the Global South (Johnson-Odim 1991; Steady 1981). WAD thus names the international economic order's complicity, linking subordination structurally to capitalism and imperialism (Anyidoho 2020). This was vividly manifested in structural adjustment's onslaught on the Global South.

While structurally focused, WAD's neglect of class dynamics, a pillar in social feminist traditions, was curious. It homogenises "Third World women" as uniformly subject to capitalism without theorising internal class stratification, even though African women's class positioning (urban middle class versus rural peasant women, for instance) reproduces its own structures of inequality (McFadden 1998; Mama 2007). By focusing on structure, WAD instrumentalises patriarchy as a mere function of capitalism, ignoring that patriarchy preceded capitalism in many African contexts and was later articulated through it, and thus an economic-structure-alone explanation is inaccurate.

WAD fared a little better on migration. It framed women's mobility as structurally determined, an effect only of capital extraction, dispossession, destruction of subsistence economy and wage dependency. WAD left women "housewifised" (Mies 1986), immobile, natural reproducers rather than mobile economic actors, women left behind by male migration and not migrants themselves. Yet, women have always migrated deliberately, for accumulation and household survival (Akurang-Parry 2002, 2010; Awumbila 2015; Darkwah 2007, 2021; Desai 2009), pursuing informal trade, domestic work, and marriage migration as economic strategies that WAD could not theorise. Social mobility is trivialised in both WID and WAD, even when women accumulate economic resources, invest them in rural properties and household formation, because such forms of mobility fall outside the productivity frameworks underpinning both perspectives.

Gender and Development

GAD was developed in the 1980s as a direct response to the limitations of WID and WAD, an effort by Global South women and feminists to define development agendas from their own standpoints. Its key contribution was shifting from women to gender as an analytical lens, examining how feminine and masculine roles, gender, and power relations are socially constructed, reproduced and transformed (Anyidoho 2021; Rathgeber 1990). It conceptualises and analyses gendered division of labour, notably reproductive and productive work. GAD aligned with gender mainstreaming, tasking institutions with integrating gender analysis across development structures and

policy to remove biases (Woodford-Berger 2004) and "improve the effectiveness of mainline policies" (Walby 2005, 321).

Yet GAD remains fundamentally challenged by postcolonial and African feminist scholars who question whether "gender" itself is a Eurocentric concept. For Oyěwùmí (1997), pre-colonial Yoruba society was ordered primarily by seniority rather than gender or the body, a framework she extends to other African societies. Thus, the imposition of a gender framework is itself a colonial epistemological act that produces the categories it claims to discover. Others similarly challenge GAD's uncritical application of Western concepts of household, marriage, and kinship to African contexts (Nzegwu 2006).

Gender mainstreaming, as adopted by institutions like the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank, also depoliticises the class dimensions of gender inequality. Mama (2007) and Tsikata (2009) show how African states' gender ministries and donor-funded gender projects absorb mainstreaming into state and donor structures without challenging the neoliberal frameworks producing gender inequality in the first place. The projectisation of women's concerns transforms political struggle into bureaucratic categories that are no longer transformative (Ahikire 2014; Mama 2007; Tsikata 2009). Similarly, GAD's institutional adoption avoids engaging sexuality as a dimension of gender power within customary laws, sexual rights, and bodily regulation (Tamale 2011). It challenges economic and legal inequalities but avoids confronting sexual power relations where patriarchy is often most entrenched, thereby avoiding the political risks (Mama et al. 2005). Since sexuality is a central mechanism of power in many African societies, this silence seriously weakens GAD's capacity to challenge patriarchy (Tamale 2011).

GAD recognises migration as gendered, with women and men migrating for different reasons, through different networks, towards different vulnerabilities, but still frames migration as a welfare concern rather than as a site of political economy and class formation (Clark 1994; Razavi and Miller 1995). West African female cross-border traders (Clark 1994; Meagher 2010) and Zimbabwean women migrating informally to South Africa (Mutopo 2010) are read through a "vulnerable women" lens rather than as economic actors embedded in regional capitalist circuits and processes of class formation. GAD

focuses on migration's effects on households rather than on how migration produces class positions within global capitalism.

WID, WAD, and GAD are fundamentally constrained by their inherited development model in which the unit of analysis is treated as a settled, geographically located subject: the rural woman, the household, and the community. A "sedentarist metaphysics" is built into the social sciences and modern ways of thinking that assumes that people belong in fixed places and therefore stability and rootedness are treated as normal and healthy, while movement is treated as deviation, loss or crisis (Malkki 1992). Sedentarism is itself a gendered assumption where women are associated with place, home, and fixity while men are associated with migration, mobility, and exploration (Massey 1993). This sedentarism is reproduced across WID, WAD, and GAD, where women's mobility is always secondary, exceptional or threatening to the social order that development is meant to stabilise. This baseline assumption is historically and empirically wrong for much of Africa, where societies have long histories of mobility—pastoralism, trade diasporas, seasonal agricultural migration, circulation of scholars and artisans—that predate colonialism (Dodson 1998). Mobility is an integral feature of African social formation, and has been violently reorganised through forced labour, pass systems, and the creation of labour reserves, making migration central to the political economy in ways that have persisted into the present.

Also, the models operate within a rigid binary conception of gender that does not capture the complexity of gender in African societies (Oyěwùmí 1997[1]; Amadiume 1987; Nzegwu 2006), instead pathologising women's experiences and failing to account for women's agency, migration, and mobility. Perhaps, the fundamental assumption that gender organises society and social life need to be reconsidered if we are to develop frameworks that treat African epistemologies as sources rather than simply as objects of analysis.

On class, these models are not specifically attuned to the particularities of African conditions. For example, the postcolonial state, the informal economy (where a very large share of African women's economic activity takes place), the role of ethnicity in shaping class formation, and the particular character of African peasantry do not receive adequate theorisation. As Clark

(1994) shows, class formation in Africa is a gendered and culturally embedded process that resists universalising models.

What is needed is not a better Western theory or framework applied to gender, class, and mobilities in Africa and its diaspora, but frameworks that take African historical social formations, social categories, and epistemic traditions as their starting points. Instead of layering gender onto theories generated elsewhere, gender must be theorised from within African political and economic conditions, such as colonial capitalism, ethnicity, race, the informal economy, and migration, as features of African political economy.

Women and Structural Adjustment

Structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), rooted in neoliberal development frameworks, were initiated and imposed across sub-Saharan Africa from the 1980s through the 1990s by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank as conditions of debt restructuring and balance-of-payments support. Prioritising market-led growth, deregulation, and liberalisation, SAPs drove privatisation, the removal of agricultural subsidies, currency devaluation, fiscal austerity, and the imposition of user fees for social services. These actions decimated social services, worsened poverty, and derailed industrialisation while reinforcing the position of African states as primarily producers of raw materials. SAPs have been criticised as extractivist, neocolonial tools that prioritised resource extraction and perpetual debt repayment to Northern creditors. They were also theoretically flawed and empirically unsupported but imposed regardless to weaken the bargaining power of African nations (Tsikata 2009; Mkandawire and Soludo 1998).

Designed without gender analysis, SAPs treated the household as a unified economic unit and were evaluated through macroeconomic indicators (Manuh 1994; Sparr 1994). African feminist critiques centre on this male bias because the programmes ignored the gendered social reproduction that became households' survival strategy once state services were withdrawn. Costs fell disproportionately on women, while gains, where they existed, were disproportionately captured by men. Women absorbed the shocks through longer hours, additional income-generating work, more care labour, and

withdrawing girls from school (Assie-Lumumba 1997). The "fiscal savings" SAPs claimed were simply a transfer of cost from state expenditure to unpaid female labour (Mama 1995, 1996, 2004). In agriculture, Tsikata (2006, 2016) documents how SAPs restructured land and labour relations, deepening women's tenure insecurity.

In urban areas, SAPs produced a paradox: women pushed out of formal employment turned to the informal sector for survival, even as trade liberalisation made these livelihoods more precarious. In Nigeria, Meagher (2010) shows how naira devaluation and retrenchment under Ibrahim Babangida expanded urban informality as the manufacturing sector collapsed, with women adapting to cheap imports. Robertson (1997) documents a similar deepening of inequality in Kenya. In Ghana, Manuh's (1994) research traces how SAPs produced new migration patterns as women moved between cities, rural areas, and abroad in search of economic opportunities the restructured economy could not provide, thereby fashioning new forms of economic agency even as they responded to structural constraints (Tsikata 2008; Mkandawire and Soludo 1998).

African women did not simply absorb these costs but organised against them, even where conditions constrained such opposition. In Zimbabwe, McFadden's (1998) analysis shows women navigating the contradictions of structural adjustment within a ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front) political environment that had co-opted women's organisations into state structures, thereby inhibiting autonomous feminist opposition. Where state regulatory capacity eroded, feminist formal organising sometimes found new room. In Uganda, Tripp (2004) argues that the withdrawal of state regulatory capacity under SAPs opened political space for women's organising around market rights and informal-economy livelihoods that had previously been suppressed. In South Africa, Hassim (2006) shows that feminist organisations secured major constitutional gains through the ANC's (African National Congress) acceptance of neoliberal macroeconomic policy and its commitment to gender equality, even as most South African women remained subject to the effects of SAP restructuring that feminist organisations lacked the capacity to challenge.

Macroeconomists responded to the gender-blindness of SAPs with calls to disaggregate data by gender and sector and account for unpaid social reproduction (Elson and Cagatay 2000). But Tsikata and Kerr (2000) argue that such reforms remain within mainstream economics' own terms, unable to theorise the power relations between African state and international financial institutions, or class interests and the colonial debt inheritance underlying adjustment. Mainstream macroeconomics renders women's unpaid labour invisible in national accounting, meaning that SAPs' apparent neutrality masks a political choice about whose labour absorbs adjustment costs (Bakker 1994). Tamale (2020) captures this starkly: SAPs were not merely a misfired economic programme but a colonial project of capital accumulation that mobilised African women's labour to service international debt and Northern capital.

SAPs' successor frameworks, including poverty reduction strategy papers and the millennium development goals, left their core macroeconomic policies intact, underfunded social sector commitments and remained subject to the same donor conditionalities (Mama 2002). Thus, post-SAP conditionality has entrenched SAP conditions as naturalised, permanent features of African political economy, obscuring their origins in specific political choices. African feminist scholarship must therefore not only document these consequences but also insist on their political and historical character, and open both intellectual and political space for alternatives to be (re)imagined.

Feminist Movements in Africa and Social Mobility: Contributions and Tensions

Having traced how dominant migration theory and development feminist frameworks inadequately theorised African women's mobility, we turn now from critique to reconstruction. The central question is: how have African feminist movements theorised social mobility from their own histories, struggles, and intellectual traditions, rather than through inherited frameworks?

Theorising social mobility within African feminist movements carries tensions over its conceptualisation, who benefits, the mechanisms through which it occurs, its limits, and whether gains achieved within existing structures

constitute genuine feminist advances or forms of accommodation (McFadden 2005; Hassim 2006; Tripp 2015). Social mobility is not self-evidently desirable without specifying who moves, on whose terms, and towards what ends (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). McFadden (2005) argues that social mobility within patriarchal and capitalist structures is not advancement but efficient incorporation into exploitative systems, thus requiring the transformation of those structures rather than accommodation within them. Nnaemeka's (2004) negofeminism takes the counter view asserting that feminist politics works better through negotiation and incremental transformation rather than rupture. Radical transformation, while theoretically consistent, can produce political paralysis where conditions for it do not exist. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), through Stiwanism (Social Transformation Including Women), sits between these positions, insisting that transformation remains the necessary horizon of feminist politics while acknowledging that it is inseparable from the daily negotiations through which African women actually pursue mobility.

Another contribution of African feminist movements is the centring of consciousness in theorising social mobility, addressing the reduction of social mobility to economic or status advancement by pointing to women's understanding of their own social positions and possibilities (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994; Tamale 2020). For Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), naming patriarchy and colonialism is itself a political act of transformation and a precondition. Developing consciousness constitutes a subjective form of social mobility that cannot be captured by economic metrics but is inseparable from and necessary for broader social, political, and economic change. Sylvia Tamale (2020) advances this by asserting that feminist consciousness requires decolonising not only external social structures but internal knowledge systems through which African women understand themselves, their bodies, sexualities, and social possibilities, which extends an argument already made about gender categories (Amadiume 1987; Oyěwùmí 1997). This opens possibilities for knowledge production from African women's standpoints, while the circulation of that knowledge within feminist publics and beyond is a form of movement in social and epistemic space that is inseparable from the material and political dimensions of feminist organising. This has been the crux of Pumla Gqola's (2017) theorisation of Black South African feminist knowledge production and

movement-building, which challenges the separation between feminist theory and practice.

African feminist movements also grapple with the tension between formal political inclusion and genuine social mobility for African women more broadly (Ahikire 2014; Hassim 2006; Tripp 2010). Hassim (2006) distinguishes between presence (formal inclusion in political institutions), voice (capacity to influence political agenda), and agency (capacity to produce policy outcomes that transform the lives of women). These dimensions are neither automatic nor concurrent. High levels of presence can coexist with limited voice, and voice with limited agency; theorising mobility therefore requires attention to all three dimensions rather than treating representation as a proxy for advancement. Hassim illustrates this with the ANC Women's League's reabsorption into the ANC after exile, what she calls "autonomy abrogated" (Hassim 2006, 116), illustrating how it produced real gains for individual women and some policy wins, but constrained collective political autonomy as independent women's organisations dissolved into the League (118–120). In Uganda, Tripp (2010, 2015) finds that women's organisations leveraged the political openings created by conflict and reconstruction to secure political gains, yet these gains were achieved within political frameworks that constrained autonomous feminist politics. Ahikire (2008) extends this argument, showing how autonomous feminist politics were progressively weakened by NGO-isation, state co-optation, and professionalisation, a pattern McFadden (2005) identifies as typical of donor-funded feminist advocacy across the continent.

A further tension concerns class interests: do African feminist organisations advance elite and middle-class women's mobility while producing poor, lower income women's immobility? McFadden (2005) argues NGO-isation and donor dependency have made African feminist organisations class-specific, advancing professional feminists' mobility while claiming to represent African women broadly. This mirrors the broader depoliticisation of feminist theorising into "a means for individual academic merit and career" (Arnfred and Adomako Ampofo 2010, 11), producing scholarship legitimised through Western paradigms at a real cost to those who produce it and to African women broadly (Adomako Ampofo 2010, 30). Tsikata (2009), with institutional evidence from Ghana, documents how professionalised gender work created a

class of specialists whose own mobility was secured through development institutions, while their advocacy failed to generate structural changes for poor women. Institutionalisation is therefore simultaneously enabling and disabling (Lewis 2010). African feminists have responded by building their own intellectual venues, *Feminist Africa* among them (Mama 2002), though even these risk being pulled towards Northern-legible frameworks at the expense of those most responsive to African women's conditions (Tamale 2020).

African feminists have leaned towards collective action frameworks where social mobility is an outcome of organised collective power rather than individual accumulation, as a response to the individualist frameworks of mainstream development theory. The 2006 African Feminist Forum's (AFF) *Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists* frames African feminist politics as a project of transforming unequal power relations rather than securing inclusion within existing structures (AFF 2007, 3–4). This is theorised via the concept of feminist solidarity where politically constructed solidarity requires actively working across class, ethnic, religious, and national differences to build the collective power for social transformation (Okech 2013). Translating the collective mobility rhetoric into practice, African feminist philanthropy (African-sourced funding for African feminist organising) is both a practical and a political statement (Adeleye-Fayemi 2013).

This collective orientation extends to decolonial feminist frameworks, which continue to shape African feminist theorising of social mobility. Tamale's (2020) *Decolonisation and Afro-Feminism* is a comprehensive work on this. Tamale (2020) argues that social mobility frameworks derived from liberal and capitalist modernity are not adequate for African feminist politics because they are products of colonial modernity that produced the conditions for African women's subordination. Genuine mobility for African women requires decolonial frameworks that challenge the superiority of formal over informal knowledge, market over subsistence production, individual over collective social organising, and Western over African epistemological traditions. This decolonial framework does not reject formal political or economic gains but rather insists that they are insufficient without the simultaneous transformation of knowledge systems and social ontologies through which African women understand their own lives. African women's mobility should not be measured against Western feminist frameworks but theorised through African social

epistemologies that may produce different conceptions of advancement, authority, and social value (Oyěwùmí 1997; Amadiume 1987). Together, these contributions constitute a significant counter-tradition. The gap between African feminists and mainstream theorising of African women's advancement is not one of empirical knowledge or technical capacity, but a political one. Development programming produces and rewards individual, measurable, formal-sector social mobility in ways that systematically discount the collective, transformative, and decolonial mobility African feminist movements have consistently theorised as necessary for addressing the conditions for African women's subordination.

Conclusions

In this feature article, we have made two related arguments. The first is that migration studies have treated African mobility as an empirical anomaly to be explained through theory developed elsewhere. Yet the historical normalcy of mobility in African societies, reflected in the porous regulation of movement in pre-colonial polities, the construction of fixed ethnic identities, and the persistence of intra-continental circulation despite these interventions, should instead serve as a starting point for theorisation. Second, development feminist frameworks reproduce a similar problem at a different scale. WID, WAD, and GAD each inherit what Malkki (1992) terms a "sedentarist metaphysics," which treats stability as the normative condition of women's lives and mobility as deviation, disruption, or exception. In this respect, the critique of migration theory in the first half of this piece and the critique of development feminism in the second are not separate interventions but two applications of the same primary argument.

A decolonial framework for theorising gender, class, and mobility in Africa therefore requires more than simply adding African cases to existing models. It requires treating mobility as integral to African social life rather than a departure from it, and African women as internally class-differentiated rather than a homogenous category that is subject to capitalism or patriarchy in the same ways. This means recognising social mobility as a collective as well as an individual process (Tamale 2020), a complexity that Weberian stratification

theory cannot adequately frame, and understanding gender, sexuality, and class as interdependent rather than as added analytical categories.

We anchor the usefulness of Shivji's (2017) concept of working people in this analysis and in the broader argument of this *Feminist Africa* Issue. WAD flattened "Third World women" into a single relationship with capitalism thereby concealing class interests that divide urban middle-class women from rural peasant women, or a market queen from a street vendor. Shivji's framework, which is anchored in the relationship to life-sustaining goods through wage labour and survivalist activity, offers a way to theorise class among African women that does not require choosing between structure and internal stratification, nor does it presuppose the rigid lower-income/lumpenproletariat divide that obscures how easily people move between these categories in practice. This framework offers a more productive alternative to Weberian stratification or an uncritical reliance on Bourdieusian notions of capital for theorising class among African women whose relationship to life-sustaining goods is precarious or proximate to subsistence. This does not mean that every contribution to this *Issue* requires or assumes this framework. Contributions working with other concepts of class remain valuable on their own terms, and the *Issue's* theoretical plurality is a strength rather than an inconsistency.

The contributions in this *Feminist Africa* Issue test and extend this framework. They range from the institutional production of citizenship hierarchies to the internal class differentiation among migrant women who appear, at first glance, to occupy a single social position. Considered collectively, they suggest that class privilege among African women may lessen but does not erase the structural vulnerabilities generated by both gendered power and colonial logics that continue to shape citizenship regimes.

Now we return to the question posed earlier: what would it take to think differently about migration, given its history of exploitation and inequality? Migration studies must stop asking why Africans move and start asking why their movement has been made to require explanation at all.

Notes:

1. This debate is not settled as Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's (1997) work has been critiqued as romanticising and essentialising gender relations in pre-colonial Africa (see Apusigah 2006; Bakare-Yusuf 2004).

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The Effects of the Government's COVID-19 Response on Migrant Women Living in Cape Town: Assessing the *Coloniality of Citizenship*[1]

Olivia Burton

Abstract

In South Africa, the existing system continues to preserve unequal gendered citizenship rights based on colonial and apartheid hierarchies. Despite a rights-based legal platform, the state reproduces racism, xenophobia, and patriarchy, creating a multitude of vulnerabilities for Black migrant women. The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions have deepened global inequality, heightening the vulnerabilities experienced by the most marginalised people in society. This has been seen in governments' pandemic responses around the world, which prioritised exclusion over solidarity—South Africa being a prime example. Through qualitative interviews with migrant women living in Cape Town and using an intersectional and feminist approach, this research evaluates the effects of the South African government's response to COVID-19, uncovering how it has exacerbated pre-existing structural inequality and violence. Despite pronounced precarity wrought by the response, the findings reveal that experiences of vulnerability were nothing new to the participants. Rather, their experiences of exclusion constitute continuity of the existing system, which systematically (re)produces racialised and gendered access to citizenship. Through this investigation, I reveal how the experiences of migrant women are symptomatic of the enduring coloniality of citizenship in South Africa, which has institutionalised their exclusion from citizenship.

Keywords: post-apartheid coloniality, gender inequality, structural xenophobia, migration discourse and practice, intersectionality, feminist research

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions have deepened global inequality and illuminated hierarchies that continue to plague society (Ryan and El Ayadi 2020). In South Africa, these hierarchies were made clear through the government's response, which failed to consider the most vulnerable in society, prioritising exclusion and the interests of the elite minority (Garba and Willie 2020). The Bill of Rights, chapter 2, sections 7–39 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, entrenches the rights to freedom of movement, dignity, security of the person, and access to housing, healthcare, and education for all people in South Africa, regardless of legal status. However, for migrant women living in South Africa, these legal provisions are meaningless, as they face a multitude of barriers that prevent them from accessing and actualising these rights (Amnesty International 2019).

By applying an intersectional lens, primarily in relation to poverty, gender, and citizenship (Yuval-Davis 2007), this research aims to evaluate the effects of the South African government's response to COVID-19 and the ways in which it has increased the vulnerabilities faced by migrant women living in Cape Town. Additionally, by examining the gendered effects of the response, as well as the marginalisation of those constructed as non-citizens, this research intends to understand whether the government policies can be seen as reinforcing an unequal and gendered citizenship paradigm in South Africa—the coloniality of citizenship. The temporality of migrant women's access to citizenship will also be examined to determine whether the government's response represents a divergence or merely mirrors the established citizenship discourse and practice in South Africa.

Pandemics, while causing immense devastation, also create the potential for rupture, exposing the unsustainability of the existing order and providing an opportunity to challenge unequal structures (Roy 2020). The last section of this research aims to evaluate moments of dissent, whereby the *coloniality of citizenship* is challenged through assertions of agency by migrant women and instances of solidarity and community between them and South Africans. This may provide inspiration and guidance, paving the way for a new citizenship paradigm in South Africa.

The History and Context of Migration and Xenophobia in South Africa

South Africa has a long history of migration, as contract workers from the Southern African region have been crucial for servicing colonial and apartheid South Africa's mining and agricultural sectors, contributing significantly to the country's economy (Everatt 2011). Migrancy in the region ties directly to colonial rule, whereby cheap Black labour guaranteed the profitability of European private enterprise (Nshimbi 2022).[2] This system was reinforced and institutionalised by the divide-and-rule policies of the apartheid state through a capitalist economic system (Ekambaram 2019). As an antidote to colonial racialised exploitation, South Africa's transformative constitutional design offered an opportunity for a different society (Moseneke 2014). The post-apartheid state, however, continued to pursue migration governance that closely resembles that of the 1913 Immigration Regulation Act (Klotz 2000). The Immigration Act of 2002, for example, failed to overturn apartheid legacies (Klotz 2000), retaining part of what has been called the "two-gate" system (Crush and McDonald 2001). This act continued to protect white labour and control Black mobility by prioritising "skilled" migration and implementing a securitised migration agenda (Kanics and Raghuram 2018).

In the decade following the 1994 election, the volume of migrants from neighbouring African countries increased significantly (Mbiyozo 2018).[3] While migration has typically been understood as a male phenomenon, the number of migrant women has steadily increased in South Africa with the rising autonomy of women's migration decision-making power (Mbiyozo 2018). South Africa's progressive constitution and economic strength within Africa seemingly offer hope for a better future—quickly flattened by high rates of exclusion and violence (Zanker and Moyo 2020).

Xenophobic violence in South Africa has become both "familiar and well documented" (Mosselson 2010, 642). Between 2015 and 2016, it is estimated that 70 people died, over 100 were assaulted and more than 10,000 people were displaced due to xenophobic incidents (Hiropoulos 2019). These acts of xenophobia result in few arrests or criminal prosecutions and have largely been met with silence and inaction by state officials (Hiropoulos 2019),

which has been read as "tacit approval that migrants should leave the country" (Chiumbu and Moyo 2018, 139). South African politicians have also repeatedly reinforced xenophobic sentiment to gain public support and accumulate political capital, while scapegoating Black migrants for domestic ills to avoid accountability (Hiropoulos 2019; Zanker and Moyo 2020).

In June 2015, after an outbreak of xenophobic attacks, the government initiated Operation Fiela ("sweep clean" in Sesotho), implicitly promising "to rid neighbourhoods of unclean foreign criminals" (Gastrow 2022, 90). Instead of providing safety and justice to migrants in the face of heightened vulnerability and victimisation, the government's response attributed blame to those being persecuted. Operation Fiela "lit up the public imagination" by affirming and widening racialised perceptions of migrants as "polluting and pestilential" (Gastrow 2022, 90–91), thus confirming the validity of fears about the harms migrants bring. This narrative reaffirms language that has been used across post-1994 migration discourse, which refers to migrants as "illegal aliens," "aliens," and "illegal immigrants," implying both otherness and criminality (Peberdy 2001, 23).

Over the years, amendments to migration policy continue to be characterised by "temporality, control and deterrence" (Van Lennep 2018) and do not fulfil constitutional obligations (Hobden 2020). Most recently, the 2017 White Paper on International Migration demonstrates the state's securitised migration agenda and its consistent project of rolling back rights. Of major concern is its plan to set up "Asylum Processing Centres," moving towards an encampment system that withdraws asylum seekers' rights to work, study, and move freely. The paper also expands the basis upon which refugees can be excluded, rejecting all those who failed to apply for status in safe countries en route to South Africa (Scalabrini 2019).

These examples demonstrate some of the ways in which the current migration discourse and practices of the South African government have shifted away from the empathetic, rights-based transformation prioritised in the Constitution and towards exclusion, encampment, and scapegoating rooted in continuing racialised exploitation in support of the neoliberal capitalist market (Ekambaram 2019).

For migrant women living in South Africa, this racialised exclusion is compounded by patriarchal violence (Mbiyozo 2018) in a context where gender inequality remains inscribed in the social and political fabric of the country (Gouws 2005). Subjected to xenophobia, racism, and patriarchy, migrant women face distinct forms of exclusion and oppression, differentiated from the experiences of male migrants and/or other South African women (Mbiyozo 2018). Migrant women, for example, have more difficulty in securing formal employment than male migrants due to gender discrimination and work predominantly in the informal sector where they are vulnerable to economic exploitation and abuse. They also live largely in poor, overcrowded living conditions and are frequently subjected to sexual and gender-based violence (Hiralal 2017). In such cases, they have limited recourse to justice, fearing deportation or further xenophobic and gender-based persecution by authorities (Mbiyozo 2019; Chapman and Jensen 2025). Despite migrant women's extreme vulnerability, their specific experiences and needs have largely been overlooked in the government's migration responses (Farley 2019) and there remains a complete absence of gendered considerations in existing domestic immigration policy (Mbiyozo 2018).

Conceptualising the *Coloniality of Citizenship* and its Relevance in Post-Apartheid South Africa

To understand the significance of citizenship as a determinant of inequality and exclusion, it must be understood from a global historical perspective. Citizenship has historically been acquired at the expense of racialised, gendered, and classed Others (Dobrowolsky and Tastsoglou 2006; Boatcă and Roth 2016). As a formal institution, citizenship can be traced back to the French Revolution, where it granted supposedly egalitarian citizenship rights in the West (Boatcă and Roth 2016). These, however, were legislated around Western, white, propertied men and engendered along colonial lines, excluding all those constructed as inferior and therefore not worthy of legal rights (Benson and Boatcă 2023). The emergence of citizenship was thus dependent on the invention of the Other, whereby definitions of "citizens" were juxtaposed against the construction of those "who, while part of the nation, [are] a 'lesser' part" (Benson and Boatcă 2023, 152).

These hierarchical categories are rooted in socially constructed racial and gender differences fabricated out of colonial binaries (Stephens and Boonzaier 2020), which have historically been used to justify white male supremacy and as a strategy of indirect colonial rule. Through this strategy, Mamdani (1996, 18) argues, tribalism was instrumentally reinforced—if not created, to facilitate the management and control of colonial subjects, dividing "native" populations according to ordered categories of identity, maintained through "a [colonial] state-enforced customary order."[4] These identity categories were enforced with the imposition of colonial borders during the 1884/5 Berlin Conference (Aniche and Moyo 2022) and later naturalised in post-colonial nation states (Mamdani 2020; Hammer 2021; Aniche and Moyo 2022). This arbitrary division of populations nurtured and promoted xenophobic consciousness (Aniche and Mlambo 2022) and has resulted in the casting out of othered targets from the political community (Hammer 2021).

The modern notion of citizenship in South Africa is deeply entangled in its specific colonial and apartheid history, whereby white settlers worked to create "white only citizenship," disqualifying the indigenous Black population (Sibanda 2022), which was formalised under apartheid (Neocosmos 2010). Under this system, Black women were further excluded and deemed minors by the law (Andrews 1986), reproducing colonial gender relations of male guardianship (Lugones 2007). The embeddedness of the divisive and exploitative colonial and apartheid systems endures in the current democratic context (Stephens and Boonzaier 2020), reiterated by the exclusionary demarcation of "foreigners" in South Africa's nation-state formation, whereby indigeneity was made the exclusive basis for citizenship (Neocosmos 2010). This state discourse denies the historicity of economic labour migration from neighbouring countries and the role of "foreigners" in the country's liberation, producing an essentialist and ahistorical conception of the political community (Neocosmos 2010).

This construction of insiders and outsiders is central to the functioning of a neoliberal economy, whereby hierarchical social differences are created to justify the exploitation of certain bodies for labour (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). According to Neocosmos (2010), the political economy of neoliberalism is a central point of departure, providing the conditions for these social cleavages that are sanctioned by the post-apartheid state to serve the

interests of the new Black elite. These cleavages demarcate who should be included or excluded in the political community and become important markers of otherness, used to differentiate between "us" and "them" (Adjai and Lazaridis 2013; Batisai 2016; Nyamnjoh, Hall and Cirolia 2022).

Also fundamental to nation-state formation was a liberal democratic conception of citizenship, centred on rights-claiming individuals. This framing fails to account for relations and structures of power that prevent the realisation of formal equality enshrined in the Constitution (Gouws 2005), concealing how the state continues to manage differences in a way that reinforces hierarchical gendered, classed, and racialised systems of power, entitling some to more rights and freedoms than others (Ellapen 2015). These markers of social differentiation intersect with one another and create a range of inequalities and oppressions for poor Black women (Crenshaw 1991), further intensified for those labelled as "foreigners" (Batisai 2016).

The term *coloniality of citizenship* captures how existing citizenship inclusions or exclusions "hark back to very entrenched colonial [raced and gendered] structures activated or revived when such exclusions are required by the colonizer, oppressor, or dominant group" (Benson and Boatcă 2023, 152). Coined by Boatcă and Roth (2016), it draws on approaches to coloniality that address the endurance of colonial hierarchies, power structures and relations (Mignolo 2000; Quijano 2000; Lugones 2007), arguing that citizenship is inextricably linked to historical gendered and raced inequalities and exclusions (Roth 2020).

Lugones (2007), building on Quijano's (2002) term "coloniality of power," maintains that gender and race co-constitute one another in the performance of coloniality. She uses the term "modern colonial gender system" to describe the enduring ways in which racialised and gendered hierarchies continue to distinguish between bodies as more or less human (Lugones 2008). This distinction, maintained through mechanisms of othering, situates certain bodies outside civilisation where they are unable to participate as citizens (Lugones 2007). The creation and justification of a system in which certain bodies are protected citizens while others are not, at the intersection of multiple oppressions, is intrinsic to the ways colonial systems

of power are maintained through citizenship in the modern world (Boatcă and Roth 2016).

I will use the term *coloniality of citizenship* to examine the ways in which racialised and gendered exclusions from citizenship are mirrored in migrant women's experiences of the government's COVID-19 response, which reinforced their intersecting vulnerabilities and failed to adhere to constitutional obligations.

I use Yuval-Davis (2007) to define citizenship as an embodied and lived experience of subjectivity, arising from the complex intersections of diverse identities, feelings of belonging, and structural and discursive configurations of knowledge and power. This definition moves beyond traditional conceptions of citizenship centred around legal status, accounting for intersecting systems of power and oppression that shape how it feels to be a citizen (Gouws 2005).

The South African Government's COVID-19 Response: Exclusionary Protection and Support

Garba and Willie (2020) maintain that the South African government's response to the pandemic prioritised exclusion over solidarity, ignoring the full range and dynamics of vulnerability. The March 2020 lockdown, starting with Level 5 regulations, had severe socioeconomic consequences for working-class South Africans, deepening existing crises of poverty, unemployment, and hunger (De Groot and Lemanski 2020). These lockdown measures restricted people's freedom of movement—requiring them to stay in their homes and to socially isolate, as well as their freedom of trade, which brought the economy (outside essential services) to a standstill (Mutambara, Crankshaw and Freedman 2021). These socioeconomic insecurities were especially severe for marginalised groups (De Groot and Lemanski 2020). Migrants—with already limited social support structures, socioeconomic prospects, access to healthcare, social services, employment, and housing—were especially impacted, deepening structural inequalities (Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020).

For migrant women, these challenges were compounded by the gendered impacts of the government's pandemic response, which intensified

the vulnerabilities faced by all women in South Africa (Ryan and El Ayadi 2020). These impacts included increased incidents of gender-based violence, women's disproportionate loss of income compared to that of men, and the additional burden of care women were forced to carry both physically and financially under the lockdown (Mutambara, Crankshaw and Freedman 2021). Despite migrant women's pronounced precarity as a result of the lockdown, they were excluded from the benefits of the government's socioeconomic support plan (Mutambara, Crankshaw and Freedman 2021).

In an attempt to alleviate some of the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic, the South African government introduced a number of support measures for individuals and businesses (Mutambara, Crankshaw and Freedman 2021). ZAR50 billion was set aside for social assistance, which was provided through a temporary six-month increase in existing unemployment and child support grants, coupled with a new COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant (De Groot and Lemanski 2020). This assistance, however, was only available to those with a South African national identity document (ID), permanent residence permit or refugee status (Ellis 2020). On 18 June 2020, the Pretoria High Court ordered that the SRD be extended to asylum seekers and special permit holders, ruling the existing grant directives unconstitutional (Mutambara, Crankshaw and Freedman 2021). Despite this ruling, research found that very few individuals with refugee status, asylum-seeker documentation or special permits were able to access the grant and, in some cases, were refused by officials on the basis of citizenship (Mutambara, Crankshaw and Freedman 2021). These eligibility criteria for accessing SRD grants overlooked the vulnerabilities of undocumented persons in South Africa, as well as those whose documentation expired during the lockdown period and who were unable to renew it due to the closure of the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) (Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020).

The South African government also provided a Business Relief Fund of ZAR500 million for 100% South African-owned businesses affected by the pandemic, excluding migrant-owned businesses (Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020). Additionally, Unemployment Insurance Fund payments offered during the lockdown were conditional on having a South African ID, rendering asylum seekers and special permit holders unable to access these payments despite their compliance with the fund's requirements

(Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020). Finally, to combat food insecurity, the government provided food parcels to food-scarce communities. Like many other relief measures, food parcels were only offered to those with a South African ID or special permit holders, excluding the vast majority of migrants (Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020). State prejudice was also displayed when the ban on informal food providers was lifted, allowing only South African-owned and operated spaza shops to function (Zanker and Moyo 2020). Thus, migrants were not only prohibited from working and earning an income to survive, but were also excluded from many of the relief measures provided to South African citizens.

Moreover, corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and a failure to regularise the asylum system have resulted in "a backlog in the processing and adjudication of documents" (Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020, 2). This, coupled with institutionalised xenophobia and a 96% rejection rate of asylum claims by DHA (Amnesty International 2019), has resulted in many refugees and asylum seekers being unable to claim their rights or access required documents (Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020). These challenges were compounded by the closure of the DHA during the pandemic (Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi 2020). By failing to take the realities of obtaining documentation in South Africa into consideration, and by requiring specific documentation to access COVID-19-related support and relief measures, the government's response heightened the precarity and violence experienced by already vulnerable migrants. These exclusionary policies and the absence of a gendered response left migrant women extremely exposed to violence and vulnerability.

Method of Gathering Data

By investigating the ways in which the government's COVID-19 response affected the vulnerabilities[5] faced by Black migrant women living in Cape Town, I hope to reveal the extent to which these experiences are rooted in colonial hierarchies of protection and inclusion. Through this investigation, I aim to understand whether the government's response can be seen as entrenching the *coloniality of citizenship* in South Africa.

I used qualitative research methods from a constructivist perspective to capture migrant women's subjective experiences. Through this approach, I wanted to understand the meaning that participants created in relation to their social conditions and the structures surrounding them. Fourteen in-person qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Nine participants were recruited via snowball sampling methods, having been introduced to me by a research informant, and were interviewed in a Cape Town township called Langa. Another five participants were recruited through the Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa via random sampling methods based on a list of names provided by the organisation. The combination of these two different sampling methods was adopted as a pragmatic strategy to address recruitment challenges and enhance the diversity of experiences captured. The interviews were conducted in various places around Cape Town city centre. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes, providing detailed and descriptive data that could convey a holistic picture of the participants' experiences and perceptions (Bryman 1988).

I followed the analytical procedures of Miles and Haberman described in De Wet and Erasmus (2005). This involved a process of first-level coding, whereby the data was grouped into 17 thematic codes, forming the broad structure of analysis. Through the process of second-level coding, the complex connections between these codes were identified, explaining their linkages in the data. This resulted in six second-level codes: heightened vulnerability by lockdown; unfreedom and entrapment; experience of violence (structural and direct); longing and lack of belonging; hope versus hopelessness; and agency and alternatives. These codes capture participants' shared experiences of vulnerability and violence before, during, and after the lockdown, as well as their complex emotional responses to life in Cape Town, including feelings of being trapped and longing for family and friends back home. They also capture practices and beliefs highlighted by participants that challenge their exclusion and work to build alternative forms of citizenship.

As an exploratory, reflexive exercise, I examined and pulled out as many themes as possible, not limiting these to the research questions. The above analytical procedure allowed for this process, helping to gather a full picture of participants' realities while still being structured and methodical.

Ethical considerations

Conducting research with vulnerable groups requires special attention to how power relations inform the process (Stephens and Boonzaier 2020). My position of privilege and associated experiences are inseparable from my ways of knowing, which inform tacit assumptions that risk subjugating other realities. To ensure I did not reproduce singular perspectives informed by my positionality or dominant knowledge conventions produced by the historic privileging of Eurocentric intellectual traditions in the social sciences (Lipscombe et al. 2021), an incremental research approach was taken. I applied a feminist research approach by constantly reflecting on my position of privilege as a white woman from a high-income-earning household and the ways in which this may affect reactivity and reflexivity in my research process. This approach also sought to draw out and convey a holistic picture of women's realities, ensuring that their complex and sometimes contradictory experiences were represented as accurately as possible in the findings.

By creating space for participants to guide the interview process based on what they understood to be important, I aimed to recognise their power and agency as experts in the knowledge I seek to attain, establishing my role as learner and theirs as teacher. In doing so, I tried to destabilise the relationship of power in the research space. Informed consent was given prior to the interviews, and the identity of each participant has been anonymised under a pseudonym and their privacy protected throughout the research process.

Vulnerability, Violence, and Exclusion: Change Versus Continuity?

The women interviewed were between the ages of 22 and 47 and came from numerous African countries, including Malawi, Zimbabwe, Ghana, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This demographic diversity aimed to capture the heterogeneity of African migrant women's experiences. Before the start of the lockdown, one woman was working in the formal economy as a

waitress and seven were working in the informal economy—two self-employed, two working for their husbands, and three working for other migrants. Six of the women had received temporary asylum-seeker permits in the first few years of their arrival, but at the time of the interview, only one participant held an asylum-seeker permit.

The findings from the interviews revealed the complicated relationship between change and continuity in participants' perceptions of their exposure to vulnerability.[4] Common themes identified in the findings revealed both how the government's COVID-19 response increased participants' exposure to vulnerability, and how experiences of vulnerability pre-dated the pandemic, impelled through institutionalised xenophobia and exposure to structural and direct gendered and racialised violence.

Participants highlighted the ways in which, prior to COVID-19, their existing intersecting vulnerabilities as Black migrant women made them and others susceptible to exploitation and abuse. One participant spoke of how she was sexually harassed by friends of her sister, while they were living in the same house, forcing her to find alternative accommodation:

> … The men that she [her sister] had in the home wanted to rape me … I didn't have someone to stand up for me so everything they were doing, I was like what can I do? And without papers, you cannot even go and accuse them. And if I was not a woman, I could live in this house, and they couldn't come to try and rape me. They know that I'm vulnerable so they can do anything they want. And I'm also a foreigner so I didn't know the language, and they just took advantage of me. Pricilla (DRC)

Here Pricilla alludes to her inability to access justice as a migrant. This was corroborated by the majority of participants who stated that they did not trust the South African police. Nine participants highlighted experiences of discrimination by police officers, where they perceived the police to be unresponsive or apathetic due to their migrant identity. These experiences, as well as the fear of deportation by the police and other officials, were expressed as preventing participants from reporting crimes and seeking justice, thus denying migrant women channels of defending themselves against abuse.

Participants also discussed multiple experiences of structural violence propelled through what they perceived as unfair exclusionary state discourse

and practice. Substantiating what is argued in the literature (Hiropoulos 2019; Zanker and Moyo 2020), participants lamented the government's continued scapegoating of migrants for the country's problems, as well as its inaction in response to instances of xenophobia. They highlighted how the government's migrant discourse emphasises difference between "foreigners" and South Africans, reinforcing ideas of "insiders" and "outsiders." Such divisive rhetoric fuels xenophobic sentiment in South Africa and dehumanises migrants in the public imagination. As Wendy (Zimbabwe) explained, the government is "making people think that foreigners are non-humans." This sentiment was echoed in the following statements:

> There are ugly things that happen to foreigners and the government is just standing there saying nothing. Especially this thing of xenophobia … I think the government really needs to implement laws that are not marginalising … to allow people to feel like they are human beings. Alison (DRC)

> They [South Africans], themselves, are struggling so they blame it on the migrants. They think that things are like this because the government says there are a lot of migrants. To change that, the government must take care of their people. Thandi (DRC)

Health xenophobia was another example of structural violence cited by participants. The majority said they had experienced name-calling or negligent care when seeking healthcare from clinics and hospitals due to their migrant identity. Some were also unconstitutionally denied treatment because they could not produce certain documentation. This was cited as especially problematic when it came to reproductive care, resulting in many participants having severely limited access to their sexual and reproductive health rights:

> Even at the hospital … when they know you are a foreigner, like when you are going to give birth, they treat you very badly. They were shouting at you like, "Why are you guys giving birth here in South Africa?" and calling us names. Sometimes even you are calling the nurses like, "The baby is here," and the nurse is saying, "Just wait," until the baby just comes by itself. Diana (DRC)

Participants also highlighted multiple challenges in attempting to access documentation, such as having to travel long distances to government offices, spend money on transport, wait in queues for hours, and experience harassment and discrimination, often only to be unsuccessful and have to return to the DHA repeatedly. One participant had been waiting for as long as

15 years to have her asylum case heard, having first applied in 2009. These experiences confirmed Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebiyi's (2020) argument that corruption, mismanagement, and xenophobia by DHA officials make the process of becoming documented nearly impossible. This inability to access documentation was also seen as a major contributor to participants' vulnerability, preventing them from accessing healthcare, safety, justice, legal aid, and finding employment, or making them defenceless against exploitation and abuse in the workplace. As Diana (DRC) put it: "If I don't have papers … I don't have any access to anything." This is epitomised by the government's requirements for accessing COVID-19-related support and relief measures, which served to reinforce exclusion. In addition to experiences of institutional xenophobia, participants voiced experiences of xenophobia and ostracism by surrounding community members. All participants reported experiencing hostility from South Africans, and the majority described verbal and/or psychological abuse.

Language was also cited by participants as contributing to feelings of isolation and exclusion by creating communication barriers and marking them as outsiders, echoing the literature (Mosselson 2010; Batisai 2016). Such experiences continually reinforced their non-belonging in South Africa and often created a longing to return home. Thus, feelings of belonging were largely absent throughout participants' time in South Africa.

When asked about their experiences during the lockdown, participants perceived it as having exacerbated their existing experiences of vulnerability, often with lasting consequences. One of the most pressing consequences of the government's response was their further impoverishment. All participants experienced a significant or total loss of household income during the lockdown period and were all excluded from government support, such as COVID-19-related relief grants. With little to no savings to fall back on, this severely impacted their ability to meet their needs and, in some cases, the needs of their children:

> And you don't even have the money to go buy food … There is no way we can work to feed the kids. We survived by the grace of God … We have lost so much. I started a business selling lightly salted Zim peanut butter, but now I lost contact with a lot of those customers. I lost my business along the way. So, it hasn't got back to where it was. We are still healing. Wendy (Zimbabwe)

This material financial impact was also highlighted by participants as having a severe impact on their mental health. Participants spoke of increased feelings of hopelessness due to their loss of income, greater impoverishment, and social isolation. They also expressed uncertainty and fear around their ability to provide for themselves. Some participants felt demoralised and degraded as the livelihoods they had worked hard to establish were crushed under the lockdown measures. This left many feeling trapped and desperate:

> Mentally, we were so disturbed. Sometimes we would feel like, "Are we still in our right senses?" … Sometimes, I felt like I was being squashed. Wendy (Zimbabwe)

> I spent days without eating and after three days … you know you have some pride and you don't want to go around to ask people, but after three days you didn't eat, look, you ask around. This was something I have never done. It's humiliating. Alison (DRC)

Here, participants describe how the government's response reduced their feeling of dignity, as they were plunged into desperation and abject poverty, reliant on others for sustenance and struggling daily to survive.

Participants also highlighted how their existing vulnerability to racialised and gendered violence was exacerbated by the social isolation measures. These measures alienated migrant women, cutting them off from crucial networks that could offer guidance and safety in an unfamiliar and often hostile environment, while giving sexual predators greater opportunity:

> The networks were disturbed because of COVID-19. Women migrants all depend on other women to ask which clinic they can go to, which hospital they can go to, to get maybe family planning pills, sanitary pads, you know those things. But now, because of lockdown, we are all in our houses and so many migrant women are now getting unwanted, unplanned babies, because they didn't know where to go. Wendy (Zimbabwe)

> Then I discovered, because of the curfew, it paved the way for some abuses for some women … Those perpetrators took advantage, because there is no one seeing them. They rape the kids. They raped the mothers. So, it affected a lot of women. Maria (Ghana)

The absence of a gendered response to COVID-19 that could account for women's distinct vulnerabilities failed to address the increased levels of gender-based violence under the lockdown and exposed women to greater instances of

exploitation and abuse. Participants also described how isolation measures intensified their care responsibilities—a challenge that was sharpened by their exclusion from child support grants, which could have alleviated some of their stress in supporting their families.

The participants interviewed form part of a broader spectrum of women and other vulnerable groups whose precarity was intensified by the government's COVID-19 response. What distinguishes the participants' experiences are the additional and intersecting vulnerabilities associated with their migrant status. These included discrimination in accessing COVID-19-related relief that could have offered participants some reprieve from their crippling impoverishment.

Racialised and Gendered Protection and Support: Assessing the Coloniality of Citizenship in South Africa

The findings demonstrate how the government's COVID-19 response reasserted migrant women's exclusion by reproducing gendered and racialised barriers to protection and support. This pushed participants further into poverty, exposed them to increased instances of gendered abuse and diminished their sense of dignity. By reinforcing barriers to accessing rights enshrined in the Constitution and degrading migrant women's sense of freedom and dignity, the government's response relegated them to the very periphery of citizenship.

The lockdown, however, merely "illuminated hidden things" (Roy 2020, 209). The findings revealed an already established exclusionary discourse and practice towards migrants in South Africa, which prevents migrant women from accessing their rights and reinforces their position as outsiders. Thus, the government's response did not bring about a substantial shift in access to citizenship but rather worsened it by reinforcing barriers to accessing rights and reasserting participants' non-belonging. I argue that this response is indicative of an already established racialised and gendered citizenship institution in South Africa that classifies people into insiders and outsiders, and into categories of the deserving and undeserving.

According to Gqola (2021), our hegemonic system of valuation has historically relied on binary thinking to position certain individuals as desirable or undesirable—a distinction through which ideological categories are made. Gqola (2021, 19) conveys how women and other sexually minoritised people "are rendered as socially female, and therefore safe to violate." Similarly, violent masculinity, dressed as nationalist narratives, is used both to mark and to produce the "foreigner" through the drawing of boundaries (Gqola 2021). These boundaries are themselves unstable, because, as Hall (1996, cited in Gqola 2021, 165) notes, "as a process, [identity] operates across difference, it entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries." Thus, the boundary between foreigner and local, insider and outsider requires discursive work that both maintains difference and produces the "foreigner" as undesirable, Other and less than human. Through the process of boundary creation and maintenance, migrant women have been rendered as both "female" and as "foreigner;" that is, as "safe to brutalise" (Gqola 2021). I argue that the government's COVID-19 response represents a discursive tactic of boundary maintenance that designates certain groups as open to brutalisation, as evidenced by the exclusion of particular racialised and gendered bodies from protection and support.

These findings also corroborate Nshimbi's (2022) argument that COVID-19 merely amplified the historically embedded hierarchisation of human beings, which differentiates between those who live in the "zone of being" and those relegated to the "zone of non-being." Migrant women's exclusion from citizenship rights and the persistent humiliation and indignity they suffer in grappling for inclusion, demonstrate how they have been relegated to the "zone of non-being," a zone into which those constructed as both "female" and "foreigner" have been compelled to fit comfortably. Thus, despite democratic promises enshrined in the Constitution, migrant women have been systematically excluded from citizenship. This demonstrates the hierarchical and exclusionary functioning of citizenship in South Africa, operating along intersecting axes of oppression—the *coloniality of citizenship*—which has been maintained and reasserted by the government's COVID-19 response.

Solidarity, Agency and Alternatives: Rupturing the Coloniality of Citizenship

According to Roy (2020, 214), pandemics have historically

> … forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcases of our prejudice and hatred… Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

The pandemic revealed the structural inequality existent globally, which is preserved by the hierarchical functioning of citizenship. However, if we take seriously Roy's argument that COVID-19 can present an opportunity to imagine a better future, it means we are at a crossroads. What remains is no small task, but it is one taken up every day from the margins as vulnerable groups struggle for access, challenging the *coloniality of citizenship* in their fight to forge a new inclusive citizenship paradigm.

Migrant women are not just passive victims, merely acted upon and dominated. They attempt to navigate and challenge their vulnerability through different strategies in their daily fight for access and recognition (Nyamnjoh, Hall and Cirolia 2022). In the face of exclusion and unrelenting barriers to citizenship, the research also revealed moments of dissent that challenged the *coloniality of citizenship*. This was seen in participants' determination and profound optimism, which enabled them to remain hopeful and find new ways of overcoming challenges. During the lockdown, participants utilised innovative methods of survival to navigate their challenges, whether through wilful rationing tactics or entrepreneurial spirit, refusing to succumb to the multiple barriers they faced. One participant, for example, used the only savings she had to start selling chips and burgers on the street:

> I only had R700 and I had to go buy a chip fryer for 600 and then with the R100 I bought a kg of potatoes and fish oil. The following day, I wrote a note on the gate saying, 'Chips for sale.' I started selling those chips, and burgers. Wendy (Zimbabwe)

Religion also played a role in the lives of participants, offering "both a network of support and a practice of agency" (Nyamnjoh, Hall and Cirolia 2022, 37). The majority of participants emphasised the role of their churches and

mosques in providing support during the lockdown, materially, spiritually and emotionally. Religious practices helped women to remain hopeful, and many participants found comfort and support in their religious communities. These examples of agencies, among realities of deprivation, demonstrate the ways in which migrant women navigate their exclusion in an attempt to access elements of citizenship beyond what they are given.

Seeking solidarity and community was another way participants tried to cope with their exclusion throughout their time in South Africa. Some participants shared how instances of support and inclusion helped them gain a sense of community:

> They are also amazing people here [in Cape Town]. They are South Africans, Black people, white people, wonderful people. And maybe it's that once you know each other and can appreciate each other, it changes … I mean the first couple of years, and even after, you don't feel this sense of belonging, but after a few years, you get used to it and you understand people's different backgrounds and stuff. Then, we can belong. Alison (DRC)

Another participant shared experiences of South Africans protecting her and other migrants when crime and violence erupted in the community, especially in the case of looting businesses:

> We are good with the community. No one ever abuses us or makes us feel uncomfortable … I'm not scared because they [South African community members] protect us. Like during the lockdown, some people came and broke the shops and stole stuff, but our community didn't want them to touch our shops and helped us pack them away before they came to make them safe. Maria (Ghana)

Examples of community support and solidarity from different people across nationalities, races and genders confront the dominant migrant discourse of difference and exclusion that aims to preserve the *coloniality of citizenship*. This was supported by participants who emphasised their commonality with poor Black South Africans arguing for the need to treat one another as equals and with compassion:

> We are all one African country ... So, we should all be united as one. Maria (Ghana)

> We just want to be equal. We are all human beings. There is nothing that changes: South African, Congolese, Zimbabwean. Pricilla (DRC)

Such narratives recognising a common humanity begin to offer an alternative citizenship discourse based on inclusion, compassion, equality, and cooperation among differences. This conceptualisation of citizenship offers a way forward towards "planetary humanism"—a concept based on complete inclusivity, where the nation is seen "as imaginary and humanity as real" (Majumdar 2022, 251).

These examples of solidarity among differences convey what Diagne and Amselle (2020) call "the universal," which, according to Walsh (2002), enables the recognition of interconnectedness among particularised interests, helping to overcome divisive politics. This site of solidarity across nationalities, races, and genders offers a collective space where shared experiences of marginalisation can transcend constructed colonial differences and where categories of insiders and outsiders can be contested, forging new collective identities out of common subjectivities and shared aims of emancipation. Although these examples of agency and dissent cannot overcome migrant women's exclusion in South Africa, they provide a glimmer of hope in an unjust system, paving the way towards the creation of a new paradigm of citizenship in South Africa.

Conclusion

By examining the effects of the South African government's COVID-19 response on the experiences of migrant women living in Cape Town, this study demonstrates how these measures exposed migrant women to heightened vulnerability at a time of pronounced precarity. Through racialised and gendered barriers to support and protection, it curtailed participants' ability to access their rights and reasserted their position as "outsiders." However, while the government's response can be seen as structurally distributing unequal and gendered citizenship, the findings suggest that this practice was nothing new. Rather, the marginalisation of those constructed as non-citizens by the government, and thus undeserving of its support and protection during the pandemic, is indicative of the already existing *coloniality of citizenship* in South Africa. COVID-19 merely amplified the pre-existing hierarchisation of human beings, established with the advent of colonialism and reinforced through coloniality (Nshimbi 2022).

By exposing the exclusionary and violent functioning of citizenship in South Africa, this research aims to shed light on the insidious character of citizenship as a marker of difference and ascription of belonging according to racialised and gendered criteria, which relegates certain bodies to the margins and normalises systemic violence. This is an important step towards recreating an alternative citizenship paradigm based on the ideals of planetary humanism, a task already being undertaken by those who know this hidden character of citizenship all too well. In the face of unrelenting exclusion and barriers to citizenship rights, migrant women displayed immense strength and agency in their struggle for access and efforts to forge solidarity and community. These examples of dissent contest constructed categories of insiders and outsiders and offer a site of struggle whereby new collective identities can be forged out of common experiences of exclusion, giving rise to an alternative paradigm of citizenship in South Africa.

Notes:

1. This article draws on research conducted for my master's thesis completed at the University of Cape Town in 2023.
2. I have chosen to capitalise the terms "Black" to acknowledge race as socially constructed while also recognising the ways in which racialisation, as a social process, has material effects (Haney Lopez 2004).
3. Migration discourse in South Africa has a distinct racial basis, centring on the homogenous portrayal of Black Africans overburdening the country by the state and the media. This, as well as the government's administrative response, has resulted in the public's conflation of different migration categories and framing of all Black foreign nationals as "illegals" (Zanker and Moyo 2020). In this research, I use the term "migrant" to refer to all African foreign nationals relocating to South Africa, regardless of their legal or documentation status, emphasising their common humanity and deservingness of compassion regardless of legal classifications.
4. The term "native" is a colonial term with negative connotations, which I use in quotation marks to indicate its problematic nature.

5. I use the term "vulnerability" to refer to structural inequalities and experiences of exclusion resulting from discrimination according to intersecting identities that affect one's physical and emotional well-being.

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Work-life (Im)balance among Nigerian Immigrant Women in Canada

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Abstract

The increase in international migration since the 1980s has raised new and fundamental gender issues that merit further study and understanding. This is especially so within gender and feminist scholarship because as the numbers of international migrants grow, new gender and feminist realities and contestations will emerge. This intersection is noteworthy and particularly deserving of study among Nigerian immigrant women in Canada as they increasingly migrate and confront the established belief that women are usually left behind in international migration. Migration is creating new gender in/equalities, class relational ethos, and tensions that are worthy of study. This article, therefore, contributes to understanding how Nigerian immigrant women in Canada respond to the tensions of competing work-life demands and at what cost. It is based on a purely qualitative study conducted among Nigerian immigrant women in Canada in 2024. Findings suggest that they face continuous and shifting challenges and adopt strategies as they struggle to balance work and life. Hence, women experience work-life balance differently, with varying degrees of conflict between work and family responsibilities and implications for their quality of life. We conclude that Nigerian immigrant women in Canada continue to face the brunt of family-life imbalance, exacerbated by pre-immigration cultural factors associated with patriarchy.

Keywords: international migration, immigrant women, work-life balance, work-life imbalance, women migration, gender roles, Nigeria, Canada

Introduction

The relationship between migration and gender has become one of the central issues of the twenty-first century. Prior to the 1970s, the movement of people and their relatives was largely understood as referring to male migrants and their family members. However, by the end of the twentieth century, a range of factors—including globalisation, increasing feminist consciousness, and female emancipation—had shifted migration trends in favour of female migrant workers (Hussein 2024; Sultana and Fatima 2017). For example, migration trends in Africa demonstrate that women are increasingly migrating at a rate equal to that of men and eventually bringing along their husbands and other family members and sending remittances home to support households, thus renegotiating gender divisions of labour (Setrana and Kleist 2022).

Regardless of patriarchal views of men as the main household decision-makers, women have inevitably gained the ability to voice their opinions in decisions pertaining to their family and migration (Mahapatro 2013). Despite patriarchal limitations, contemporary circumstances have led to a significant change in the expectations and roles of women. Over the past three decades, with the rise of working mothers and shifts in traditional father roles, working couples are grappling with responsibilities and allocation of duties as husbands and wives (Akanle, Adesina and Ogbimi 2016). These changes have implications for women migrants. In Hussein's (2024) work on Afro-feminism and twenty-first century migration processes, migration remains a double-edged sword for women. For example, while it enables them to shift negative representation, confront gender exclusion, disrupt traditional cultural spaces, and oppose patriarchal dominance and exclusion, it can also reinforce gender inequality. Afro-feminism provides a theoretical context for understanding the contemporary realities of African women's migration and their struggles to negotiate agency and deconstruct many years of gender exclusion.

Despite the risks associated with migration, including gender-based violence and stigmatisation, it increasingly enables women to confront their vulnerabilities, primordial gender constructions, class hierarchies, ascribed social positions, and subjectively bestowed identities. Afro-feminism explains and addresses the everyday lived experiences and challenges African women

face in the context of gender relations, class negotiations, and hierarchical constructions of sex (Setrana 2025). This serves to narrate the real experiences of women in the context of patriarchal tendencies (Teye et al. 2025). For Afro-feminism, the intersections of gender, race, and class definitively activate and enable the unique oppression of women. Even though commonly used to jumpstart discussions and actions on the African continent, unfolding realities in the context of international migration suggest the need to move beyond Africa-specific colonial analyses to accommodate international and transnational contexts (Flanagan and Lumley-Sapanski 2025; Setrana 2025; Teye et al. 2025; Okeke-Ihejirika, Punjani and Salami 2022).

Afro-feminism is not a unified tradition but a contested intellectual and activist project, and its internal debates are directly relevant to the analytical aims of this article. Scholars such as Oyěwùmí (1997) have challenged the very applicability of gender as an analytical category to pre-colonial African societies, arguing that Western feminist frameworks import gender distinctions that were not integral to African social organisation and that applying them to African contexts reproduces a form of epistemic colonialism. Others, including Hussein (2024), Setrana (2025), and Okeke-Ihejirika, Punjani and Salami (2022) argue that colonialism, globalisation, and transnational migration have so thoroughly transformed African gender relations that these distinctions are now analytically unavoidable and refusing them in the name of cultural authenticity risks leaving African women's structural subordination theoretically unaddressed. For Nigerian immigrant women in Canada, this tension is not merely theoretical; rather, they inhabit a social space where pre-colonial communal logics, colonial patriarchal impositions, Nigerian postcolonial gender norms, and Canadian liberal feminist institutional frameworks are simultaneously operative, producing contradictions that no single feminist tradition can resolve cleanly. Afro-feminism is deployed in this article not because it provides a settled framework but precisely because it refuses to resolve that complexity into a single explanatory register, insisting instead on holding the intersections of gender, race, class, and colonial history in productive analytical tension. It is this capacity for complexity, rather than any programmatic unity, that makes

Afro-feminism the most appropriate theoretical resource for understanding the work-life negotiations of Nigerian immigrant women in Canada.

Afro-feminism enables the interrogation of how structural inequalities and systemic discrimination (such as deskilling, the privileging of Canadian credentials, and precarious work) shape immigrant women's work-life balance. This occurs as they negotiate their agency to balance professional ambitions with family and life obligations. Afro-feminism provides analytical context to understand women's agency, resilience, resistance, self-definition, and subjective negotiations of communal and traditional family roles to achieve strategic balance in everyday life. Using an Afro-feminist perspective allows the article to capture the usually taken-for-granted gendered experiences of Nigerian immigrant women in Canada in a more nuanced way. Afro-feminism thus provides a relevant framework for understanding the work-life (im)balance of Nigerian women in Canada.

According to Edem (2023), Afro-feminism provides strong theoretical remit for epistemic intervention to contextualise Nigerian immigrant women's experiences as they navigate and negotiate their agencies within the complex and complicated labour market and family systems of destination countries, in this case, Canada. As Nigerian women continue to migrate to Canada, scholarship situated within Afro-feminism is vital for advancing knowledge on the emerging realities of African immigrant women, particularly as they participate in the labour market while also negotiating family relationships in ways that are healthy and balanced (see also Oguntola 2022).

Integrating Afro-feminism clearly demonstrates the intrinsic and vital relationship between gender and migration (Nawyn 2010). This is an important contribution of this article because, over the past 40 years, there have been increasing changes in the gender demographics of African migrants, yet scholars have not sufficiently examined these changes from a feminist lens. As they seek to understand women's experiences of migration, there is a need for sufficient attention to African women's migrant experiences and to the meaningful integration of feminism, especially Afro-feminism, into migration analysis—especially in labour studies, to ensure more valid and reliable research and epistemic interventions (Nawyn 2010). Nawyn's call for

feminist integration into migration studies is necessary but insufficient as a framework for understanding African women's migration. This is because its feminist traditions remain largely anchored in North American and European theoretical formations, built primarily around the experiences of Latina and Southeast Asian migrant women, whose trajectories, motivations, and gender negotiations are structurally distinct from those of Nigerian and West African women migrating to Canada. This poses both an empirical coverage and an epistemic problem.

West African women enter mainstream gender and migration literature as variations of already theorised subjects, rather than as subjects whose experiences require new frameworks altogether. The global care chain literature, which is foundational to gender and migration scholarship, was built on the figure of the Filipina or Latin American domestic worker migrating to serve Western households. The Nigerian professional or semi-professional woman migrating to Canada to advance her career while managing transnational family obligations fits this template poorly, and the misfit is theoretical rather than incidental. Afro-feminism's insistence on centring African women's specific historical, colonial, and cultural formations is therefore not an additive gesture to existing literature, but a corrective epistemic intervention advanced in this article.

According to Walizada (2022), migration can have positive impacts by increasing educational and work opportunities, driving social change, and expanding worldviews that support greater gender equality and equity within the context of international migration. International migration is deemed to empower women and promote gender equality by increasing their power to negotiate their agencies within households, enabling them to play significant financial and social roles in both their home and destination countries (Hennebry, Holliday and Moniruzzaman 2017). This is especially so when such migrations are to Western countries, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Australia, and member states of the European Union. While much has been made of the benefits of international migration for women (for instance, independence and autonomy, change in gender relations in the context of families, acquisition of new skills and knowledge, and sending home remittances to support left-behind households), much less attention has been paid to its negative impact, particularly at household level.

Those that exist point to spousal conflicts, contested perspectives on women's rights (Manuh 1999), and the dynamics of gender ideologies (Asima 2010). The family-work experiences of migrant women have been left largely unexplored, and this article seeks to address that imbalance.

Canada, as the empirical context of this study, has become the destination of choice among Nigerian migrants (Ola-Lawson and Akanle 2025) and presents a particularly sharp contradiction that Afro-feminism is well-positioned to interrogate. Its self-presentation as a multicultural, gender-equitable destination is not simply a perception among Nigerian migrants but a structurally produced national narrative that performs specific ideological functions. Canadian multiculturalism, as scholars of race and nation in Canada have argued, operates as a framework for managing racial difference rather than dismantling racial hierarchy, producing a national identity in which immigrants are welcomed as contributors while simultaneously racialised as perpetually foreign and channelled into stratified positions within the labour market (Thobani 2007). For Nigerian immigrant women, this means arriving in a country whose institutional frameworks formally guarantee gender equity while materially reproducing racialised labour market segmentation, credential devaluation, and childcare inaccessibility, as this study documents. The gap between Canada's multicultural self-image and the lived experiences of the women in this study is not incidental to Canadian policy but structurally produced by it. Afro-feminism's insistence on naming the intersection of race, gender, and colonial geographies of labour provides the analytical tools to hold that contradiction visible throughout the analysis, preventing it from being absorbed into either a celebratory narrative of migration as opportunity or a simple victimhood narrative of migration as exploitation.

This article begins with an introduction. The next section is a discussion of migration and gender roles in Africa, providing insight into pre-immigration patriarchal contexts and structures that may continue to shape immigrants' lives, social relations, expectations, and activities in Canada. The third section covers immigrant women's work-life balance, situating their experiences within Canada's work-life policy context and highlighting the gendered factors that shape their everyday lives. The methodology section details the research design and procedures adopted in this study. The results

and discussion are presented in three parts: the first examines the work-life (im)balances experienced by Nigerian immigrant women in Canada; the second explores how they negotiate work-life balance; and the third examines periods when work-life balance is not achieved. The article concludes by summarising the key findings and implications.

Migration and Gender Roles in Africa

This section provides important pre-immigration African cultural contexts for the experiences of immigrant women in Canada. This is important because the challenges African immigrant women face in destination countries are often exacerbated by sociocultural factors they were socialised into and internalised prior to immigration (Yijälä and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2010). These social and cultural factors are often associated with African patriarchy.

The patriarchal formations that shape Nigerian immigrant women's expectations and experiences of domestic labour require historicisation before they can be analysed. What the women in this study carry with them to Canada is not "African culture" in any essentialised or primordial sense, but rather a hybridised gender formation bearing the layered marks of pre-colonial social organisation, colonial intervention, and postcolonial restructuring. Amadiume's (1987) foundational work on Igbo gender formations demonstrates that many of the domestic arrangements now naturalised as "African tradition," including the strict association of women with the private sphere of household management and men with public economic and political life, were actively produced and consolidated through colonial labour policies, missionary education systems, and the legal codification of customary law. These selectively froze and rigidified gender arrangements that had previously been more fluid.

The structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 1990s compounded this by pushing women disproportionately out of formal economies and into unpaid or informal care work, further entrenching their identification with domestic labour at precisely the moment when global migration was beginning to offer an exit route (Apusigah 2009). Understanding African patriarchy as a historical product rather than a

cultural constant has direct analytical consequences for this study. It means that when Nigerian immigrant women in Canada find themselves expected to manage both full participation in the Canadian workforce and full responsibility for domestic and childcare duties, the burden they carry is not simply "what Nigerian culture demands" but the accumulated weight of colonial and postcolonial gender formations that migration relocates without dissolving. Afro-feminism's insistence on historicising these formations is essential to preventing the analysis from inadvertently reproducing the essentialism it seeks to dismantle.

African culture has evolved significantly due to capitalism and Westernisation, redefining women's roles in the household, society, and workforce, extending their involvement beyond the home. Increasingly, women's activism and resistance to patriarchy have generated an unprecedented demand for capacity building, such as acquiring a competitive education and skills, capital accumulation, and leveraging migration as a means of negotiating and asserting women's agency. Women exercise their agency in many ways, including through migration (Kanu, Bazza and Omojola 2021; Antman 2018). Thus, the roles of women in recent times have gone beyond traditional stereotypes of household care. For instance, Nigerian women migrants contribute remittances and expertise, participate in economic and social decision-making, and return investments and technological innovations to their nation, all of which are vital to the survival of their households and society (Akanle 2024).

Issues in Work-Life Balance of Immigrant Women

This section is particularly relevant in understanding the Canadian context relative to work-life balance policies for Canadian workplaces. The concept of work-life balance, as it circulates in both policy and scholarship, rests on a normative subject rarely named but consistently assumed to be a worker with formally recognised credentials, stable contractual employment, and access to institutional support mechanisms, such as flexible hours, parental leave, and subsidised childcare. This subject is not the Nigerian immigrant woman in Canada. As Ferrer and Dhatt (2025) demonstrate, racialised immigrant women are systematically channelled into precarious, low-wage sectors of the

Canadian economy through processes of credential devaluation and labour market segmentation that existing work-life balance frameworks were not designed to address.

The work-life balance literature drawn on in this article, including contributions from Zhao and Hannum (2019), Nsaful, Sheng and Martey (2021), and Shah and Shah (2016), was developed primarily in contexts where the racialised immigrant woman is not the normative subject and where the formal employment relationship can be assumed. To import these frameworks into the analysis of Nigerian immigrant women's experiences without first interrogating their normative assumptions risks reproducing the very exclusions they claim to address. Afro-feminism compels a more foundational question: not whether these women can achieve work-life balance as institutionally defined, but whether the concept of balance, as it has been constructed in organisational psychology and human resource policy traditions, was ever built with them in mind. This article proceeds from the position that it was not, and that an Afro-feminist reframing is therefore necessary to make the concept analytically useful for this population.

For example, Canadian work-life balance policies include flexible hours, paid leave, and employment equity. The objective of these policies is to support families and prevent work-life imbalance associated with stress and conflict (Boamah et al. 2022). These policies are, however, not specifically targeted at Nigerian and African immigrant women who struggle to balance paid work and family responsibilities while also negotiating pre-immigration patriarchal norms and expectations alongside the demands of everyday survival. Canadian policies do not sufficiently reach Nigerian immigrant women, who are often confronted with multiple structural and systemic barriers. Even though significant progress has been made in Canada, and the country comparatively ranks among the best in the world for work-life balance policies (McNally 2025), these barriers remain formidable for these women. Many immigrant women are still confronted with huge wage gaps and little success in work-life balance when compared with non-immigrants (McNally 2025). Nigerian immigrant women also face challenges related to deskilling and credential devaluation among skilled immigrants, precarious immigration status, difficulties associated with the recognition of foreign qualifications and the "Canadian experience" requirement. Hence, there is substantial

inequality in the application of Canada's work-life policies, which often fail to effectively address the real and specific needs of racialised immigrant women, who regularly face unfair treatment and are often channelled into lower-paying sectors of the economy (Ferrer and Dhatt 2025).

Generally, research has shown that women's professional advancement is still more constrained by family obligations than that of men. A study by Zhao and Hannum (2019) shows that migrant women's childcare responsibilities negatively affect employment and income, as pre-migration cultural roles and traditional divisions of labour often persist in destination countries. Gender-based divisions of labour are a significant source of dissatisfaction. The unpredictable nature of twenty-first century work has made it difficult for employees to balance professional and family obligations (Nsaful, Sheng and Martey 2021), particularly for women (Jacob, Sundram and Othman 2024; Shah and Shah 2016).

Flexible work schedules for working parents in the United States lead to increased job satisfaction and employee retention, although men tend to benefit from these arrangements more than women (Zhao, Settles and Sheng 2011). In a similar vein, a study on the experiences and causes of work-life conflict among married Indian professional women found that the influx of mothers into the labour market has made it more difficult to manage the work-life nexus because of a lack of flexibility at work (Srivastava 2007). Also, a study in Ghana found that work-life conflict negatively impacts doctors' job satisfaction, particularly among women, due to incompatible demands, leading to lower performance and reduced job satisfaction (Nsaful, Sheng and Martey 2021). Zhao, Settles and Sheng (2011) argue that ongoing disparities in pay and career opportunities, coupled with unpleasant working conditions, as well as policies that make quitting the job easier than accessing it, reinforce the assumption that women should adjust their careers to meet domestic responsibilities and maintain work-life balance.

Women consistently report higher stress levels than men, particularly full-time mothers with children under the age of 13, who exhibit the highest levels of stress resulting from familial, occupational, and economic factors (Yu et al. 2020). Shah and Shah (2016) add that for parents (especially women) who manage these responsibilities daily, securing childcare can be particularly

difficult in environments where available spaces are limited. Consequently, the career development of working mothers is negatively affected by work-life conflict, including time constraints, stress, and behavioural conflicts (Dizaho et al. 2016). Highly skilled women outsource household chores to reduce time spent on housework, but this is difficult for women in low-paying jobs (Milkie et al. 2025; Raz-Yurovich and Marx 2019). A survey by Wray (2024) indicates that more women are compelled to cut back on or alter their work hours to be able to better manage the competing demands on their time. Nonetheless, although part-time work helps balance work and family life, many employees, particularly women, do not work part-time by choice (Shah and Shah 2016).

Since economic reasons top the motivations for women's migration decisions, Nigerian immigrant women are increasingly becoming integrated into the workforce, leading to conflicts between work and family responsibilities. Khosa-Nkatini, Buqa and Machimana (2023) note that women are taking on greater household economic responsibilities, but the distribution of domestic responsibilities remains inequitable, with women bearing the load for both economic and domestic tasks, heightening tensions between work and family life. While adjusting to the new culture in destination countries, they encounter different difficulties such as balancing the demands of managing their homes, establishing themselves in a new job environment, advancing their careers, sending money home to support their families through remittances, and adapting to their new environment.

Methodology

Given the upsurge in migration along the Nigeria–Canada corridor (Olujobi 2024; Richter et al. 2020), this article employed an exploratory research design to examine the lived experiences of Nigerian immigrant women in Canada. Data were collected in 2024 through ten in-depth qualitative interviews with married Nigerian women who had children and had worked in Canada for at least a year at the time of the research. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling.

The initial participants were drawn from kinship and social networks within the study population. These contacts were identified across various

settings, including among neighbours and colleagues. They were, however, carefully selected and screened in line with the study objectives and methodological considerations to avoid over-recruitment from the same or closely connected kinship and social networks. This was important in preventing redundancy in the data. The women were identified through groups or communities, networks, and associations such as occupational or professional groups, religious groups, and any other Nigerian groups or communities in Canada. The interview tool was employed as a data-gathering method since it has been demonstrated to be effective in gathering real-time and reliable data on women's lived experiences. Virtual means, such as WhatsApp calls, were used to connect with participants.

Data gathered were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Content and thematic analyses were employed through the generation of codes and nodes to investigate the various experiences of women based on their length of stay in Canada, type of job or career, education status, family type, and immigration status. Core ethical principles including informed consent, non-maleficence, and voluntary participation were rigorously observed throughout the research process.

Results and Discussion

Work-life (im)balances of Nigerian immigrant women in Canada

Nigerian women arriving in Canada often find that the realities of combining work and family life differ from their expectations of working and exercising agency without having any role conflict or work-life imbalance. They may experience culture shock as they encounter Canada's more individualistic approach to childcare, in contrast to the communal support systems familiar in Nigeria. Career women with young children, especially toddlers, face significant challenges balancing paid work and childcare without the informal support networks available in their country of origin.

Titi, a married 42-year-old woman with four children and living in British Columbia, expressed the following sentiment:

> The first challenge I had was my kids. That was a major challenge because I had [a] 4-year-old that cannot start school because they start school at 5-year-old, so I had to pay for her. I had to pay day care service, which can't happen at home. I have several people that would be ready to help, so that was my first challenge. Well, in all sincerity, the start is very rough because for mothers back home, we have support from siblings, parents, relatives, but here, most times, it is you alone. When we got here, we had to start all over again. You don't have any parents to take your kids to. Everything here is about you alone unlike Nigeria; if I'm going out, I can leave my baby in the house and go out and I am very sure they can't just go out because there will be a grandma in the next house. Even when I didn't tell her to watch over [her], she is ready to watch over if she sees them walking around, she will challenge. But here, we don't have that. We had to start over by letting them know you don't just bump out; you must stay in your space.

Titi's account is not simply a story of logistical inconvenience. Read through an Afro-feminist lens, it is testimony to what Hussein (2024) identifies as migration's double-edged character for African women: the simultaneous opening and closing of possibility. What Titi mourns is not merely the absence of childcare, she mourns the collapse of a communal architecture of care that African patriarchy, for all its limitations, distributes across women collectively. The "grandma in the next house," who might intervene when a child was left unsupervised, was not a service provider. She was a node in a gendered network of mutual obligation that, however unequally constructed, functioned as social infrastructure. Canada's individualist model replaces that network with a market-based system, including paid day care, regulated working hours, and age thresholds. For Titi, this is not an upgrade, but a privatisation of burdens previously, if imperfectly, shared. Afro-feminism insists that we resist romanticising African communal structures while simultaneously refusing to accept that their Western replacements are neutral or superior (Okeke-Ihejirika, Punjani and Salami 2022). What the women in this study experience is precisely that refusal made flesh. They are caught between a care system they have left and a care market they cannot yet fully access or afford. Sola, a 32-year-old newly arrived migrant woman who was unemployed and had one child, said: "My school just started almost immediately. So, it was not easy. There was nobody I could leave the child with."

As noted by Shah and Shah (2016), the women also expressed dissatisfaction with the high costs associated with enrolling their children in day care facilities. This was a huge challenge, particularly for those who were financially unstable. The challenge was compounded by Canadian regulations, such as restrictions related to the duration of immigrants' stay and age limits for enrolment, which meant that access to day care facilities was not necessarily automatic. It is no wonder that studies have shown that women consistently have higher stress levels than men (Yu et al. 2020). This stress is due to the conflict between family obligations and career or educational advancement that women experience due to the traditional roles of childcare ascribed to them. Shah and Shah (2019) have noted that, given that women are still primarily in charge of maintaining stability within the home, the gender-based division of labour in households continues to be a significant source of dissatisfaction for working mothers.

Interestingly, the study revealed that all the participants went through similar experiences, especially for the first few months of their arrival in Canada. Christiana, a 54-year-old Ibibio woman who has been in Canada for 17 years confirmed this, saying: "If none of your kids was up to 12 years old, you couldn't leave them at home. You either must put them in a day care, which is quite expensive, or you have to stay with them. So, that was hard."

A third constraint on work-life balance among migrant mothers in Canada is the distance between their workplaces and homes. This problem was reported very often by the interviewees. In fact, it was among the most reported problems. Immigrant mothers want a job to sustain them in their new environment. However, after a long job hunt, they get the job only to discover it is far away, which makes working and caring for their families at the same time difficult. Despite waking up early to take care of their families, many of them lose track of time, get to work late and may not be paid for the day. Low-paid workers are often faced with these challenges. Folake, a 31-year-old Yoruba woman, who had just arrived in Canada shared her experience:

> So, my resumption time is 8am. I have to leave home at around six and by the time I'm coming back, it is the same thing. I leave work at four. I don't arrive until 6pm. Mind you, the buses might have a delay, maybe the weather or something, or there's a three-minute delay, five minutes delay. There are times

> when I miss the bus and I have to run after the bus, and I'll just cry like, "What the hell is happening? Like, why am I here?", especially during winter. It is so cold and you miss your bus and you're supposed to be at work at 8am. So that was really sad. I remember several times that I had to cry and my husband would just tell me not to worry. It's one of the things that you're going to share as a story sometime. And about two times I had to Uber my way down to work. I'd be like… "Naija babe, how much are they paying me that I'll carry Uber to work? What nonsense!" And if you're late to work, you will not be paid.

Folake's account of her daily commute, waking at six and arriving home at six, crying in the cold when she misses the bus, condenses what Flanagan and Lumley-Sapanski (2025) term "cumulative disadvantage" into a single working day. The Afro-feminist intervention here is to name the specific intersectional character of that disadvantage. Folake is not simply a low-wage worker navigating a difficult city. She is a racialised African immigrant woman whose position in the labour market (marked by low-paying work, a distant worksite, and unpaid penalties for lateness) is structurally produced by the same systems that devalue her Nigerian qualifications and channel her into precarious sectors of the Canadian economy (Edem 2023). Her exclamation, "Naija babe, how much are they paying me that I'll carry Uber to work?" is not mere frustration. It is an Afro-feminist articulation of the gap between her self-understanding as a skilled, capable woman and the identity the Canadian labour market assigns her. That she frames it with humour and national identity ("Naija babe") is itself a form of what Setrana (2025) calls "resistant self-definition"—a refusal to internalise the diminishment her circumstances impose.

How Nigerian immigrant women in Canada manage work-life balance

Family support for work reduces work-life conflict, lowering job stress and turnover, while high conflict leads to increased stress and employee attrition (see also Jacob, Sundram and Othman 2024). The extent to which single migrant mothers or married migrant mothers without their husbands present struggle during the initial stages of migration in host countries cannot be compared with those who migrated with their husbands. Findings suggest that shared and collective responsibilities among husbands, wives, and children often make it easy for migrants to settle in. Women with grown-up children

and supportive husbands face less stress compared to those with toddlers and unsupportive husbands. Sade, a 48-year-old married woman with two children, said:

> I play a role, my husband plays a role, and my kids play a role. So, in all of these things, it's just understanding and collaboration because to be a wife is not easy in this environment. Then when you have an understanding husband and he's able to take on some of those tasks from you, that makes it a little bit easier. And then, like I said, my kids were a little bit grown when we came here, so we're able to talk to ourselves. So, it's not only one load It's not like Nigeria where a woman wants to carry everything: she comes back home, she has to cook, she has to jump here, she has to jump there. So, it's basically collaboration. Each person, each member of the family is able to contribute one way or the other.

Sade's account of family collaboration, "it's not like Nigeria where a woman wants to carry everything," invites a careful Afro-feminist reading that resists two easy interpretations. The first is a celebratory narrative in which migration liberates African women from patriarchal domestic arrangements, a reading that would align with liberal feminist assumptions about the West as a site of gender progress. The second is a dismissive reading that treats Sade's relief as evidence of false consciousness, that she has simply adapted to a different form of the same patriarchal bargain. Afro-feminism, as Hussein (2024) argues, refuses both positions. What Sade describes is not liberation but negotiated agency. It is a strategic renegotiation of the gender contract made possible by the specific material and structural conditions of Canada, where the absence of extended family networks makes male non-participation in domestic work practically unsustainable rather than merely ethically objectionable. Her husband's assistance is enabled not by his transformation, but by necessity. This distinction matters analytically because it suggests that the apparent gender progress some of these women experience is structurally contingent, fragile, reversible, and dependent on conditions that could shift. Afro-feminism demands that we celebrate women's agency without mistaking structural contingency for structural change.

Bukky, a 50-year-old married woman with four children, also said balancing work and family life is easier for women with supportive husbands and older children:

> When the children were young, you attend to them and then, of course, all of them are older now. You must work as a family. The man helps in the house and the children too. And that's how you balance. One person cannot do it because you get burnt out.

Migrant women without children and migrant women with a spouse and children they left behind express an ease of integrating into destination countries because they have time to advance their education and work if they want to without having to worry about responsibilities at home. Kemi, a 32-year-old single Nigerian migrant mother living in Ontario, said:

> Well, my child is not with me. My child is back home in Nigeria. And when it comes to family, having to manage all of us, it's more like I'm single here. I'm just alone here. So, I mean, the only way I get to manage my family back home is just by communication, keeping tabs on them, you know, constant communication and all of that. And yeah, I would say it hasn't been like so difficult to do. It's actually been easy to manage, if I would say. But maybe if they were all here with me, it would have probably been a different moment.

Kemi's quiet observation, "it's more like I'm single here," surfaces one of the most theoretically significant patterns in the data: transnational motherhood as a work-life management strategy. That Kemi has achieved what she describes as relative ease in Canada by leaving her child in Nigeria is not an individual choice made in a vacuum. It is a survival strategy produced at the intersection of race, class, immigration status, and gender, in which the costs of migration are distributed transnationally and borne disproportionately by children and the women (grandmothers, aunts, female kin) who care for them in the country of origin (Hennebry, Holliday and Moniruzzaman 2017). Afro-feminism's attention to the intersections of gender, class, and colonial geographies of labour is essential here. The transnational family arrangement Kemi describes is not a freely chosen flexibility. It is a response to a Canadian labour market and childcare infrastructure that makes full family presence prohibitively costly for women in her economic position, while simultaneously depending on the uncompensated reproductive labour of African women left behind. Her "ease" is therefore produced by a global, gendered economy of care that Afro-feminism names as a continuation of colonial extraction in domestic form.

Flexible work policies contribute to a more manageable work-life balance. Women with high skills in high-paying jobs tend to enjoy these benefits compared to low-skilled women in low-paying jobs. Tinuke, a 35-year-old Igbira mother of one, said:

> I'm grateful to work in a community house. So, five o'clock, you're done from work. You can get out of the office and start your day. My company personally has provision for all these things. So, it's working in a company that is able to understand what work-life balance should be. And it's able to help women to achieve that. So, a woman is really in charge of taking her kids to school, making their breakfast, taking them off to school, helping them with homework, taking them to their games, cooking food, cleaning and stuff. You probably need some time to de-stress and my company has those. We have a work-life balance day, that's what we call them. So, I think there are seven days of work-life balance days. It's just to help you as a company worker to be able to de-stress when you need to. And that's separate from your vacation. So, if, for instance, I wanted to rest on Monday because I've had a very busy Saturday or Sunday, I could take that Monday as a work-life balance day. Because maybe I have a lot of school, and maybe like my children's activities throughout Saturday, church, and other activities I have to do, you know, with all of the things. And then on Monday I'm tired, I can't go to work. I can take that one day as a work-life balance day, which is not part of my annual cycle. In the company that I work with, we have so many ways that women can be able to de-stress, be able to fall out of work, and so on.

Findings also suggested that women with flexible work hours are better able to cope with balancing work and family responsibilities. Flexible work arrangements for working parents lead to increased job satisfaction and employee retention, while part-time work can facilitate the balancing of work and family responsibilities (Shah and Shah 2016; Zhao, Settles and Sheng 2011). Such is the case for Mary, a 38-year-old Igbo Nigerian migrant woman, who noted, "The beauty here is you work per hour, so it is my choice to pick the time I know suits me so that it won't affect my home."

When Nigerian women in Canada cannot balance work and life

For one group of women, the consequence of these conflicting roles has been the forfeiture of work or education. While trying to establish themselves in a

new environment with strict rules and policies concerning children's care and welfare, migrant mothers often struggle to manage academic pursuits and family duties, sometimes making huge sacrifice in their careers. These competing demands were frequently associated with mental health issues such as depression. This was reported very often by the interviewees during data collection. Sola, the 32-year-old Yoruba woman married with a child, shared her experience:

> You know, travelling, relocation, it happens to cause you a lot of depression. That's another reason why I left school was that I was flopping and failing because there was nobody to drop my son for. Another thing, you can't just leave your child. Even back home in Nigeria, if you don't know somebody so well, you can't leave your child. And me, I came here all alone. I didn't know anybody at all. I was not familiar with anybody. So, there was nobody I could leave my son [with]. So, it's like choosing between your school and your child. So, who comes first? So, I just had to. It's something that you are never prepared for, no matter how prepared you think you are. Even coming here as a single person, it's not easy not to talk of coming as a mom. So, it was not easy. So, I just felt, okay, I don't think this is for me right now. Let me just change to work permits. Then along the line, I will eventually go back to school.

Sola's decision to suspend her studies, "choosing between your school and your child," is the moment at which the Afro-feminist concept of intersecting oppressions becomes most legible in this dataset. Sola arrived in Canada with educational aspirations that constitute what Edem (2023) identifies as the core promise of migration for Nigerian women, which is an epistemic mobility—the chance to accumulate credentials and capital that patriarchal Nigerian structures have made difficult to access. This promise is foreclosed not by formal discrimination but by the absence of childcare, a structural gap that disproportionately affects women and most severely affects single immigrant women of colour. This is precisely the kind of systemic discrimination Afro-feminism insists on naming (Flanagan and Lumley-Sapanski 2025). The disadvantage is compounded by the fact that Canada is often portrayed as, and perceived by many of the women in this study to be, a more gender-equitable society than Nigeria. The distance between that self-presentation and Sola's reality, "no matter how prepared you think you are," is not an anomaly or an oversight in Canadian policy. It is, from an Afro-feminist standpoint, the structural invisibility of racialised immigrant women

within a gender equity framework designed around a normative female subject who is white, Canadian-born, and credentialled (Ferrer and Dhatt 2025). Sola's story does not fall through the cracks of that framework; it reveals where the framework's floor was never built.

In similar circumstances, some women revealed that they stayed out of the job market for a while so that they could attend to family needs. This was difficult particularly for women who migrated for economic reasons. Sacrificing their career for family responsibilities is not an easy task, especially for women without support. Bukky affirmed, "Well, you just stay without working for a while, and then if you get a job, you get a job that, you know, will give you time to do those things."

For a second group of women, three constraints shape their ability to balance work and family life: limited informal support systems, the financial costs of childcare, and distances between home and work. In a country that promotes gender equity, they begin to believe that, just as women take on provisioning responsibilities, men should share household responsibilities. Their male counterparts are, however, unlikely to agree. Thus, when the women turn to their partners to contribute to domestic work, the extent to which those partners are steeped in African patriarchal orientations and mentalities often determines whether such requests lead to conflict, sometimes violence, and eventually, divorce. According to Tolu, a 48-year-old Yoruba woman married with three children and living in Manitoba:

> It is happening here right now, especially for a couple where the woman did not have a voice in Nigeria and then you come here and discover that this place favours women more than men. The woman has all the power over here. So, if the man still behaves as if they are in Nigeria, there is bound to be [a] problem. Now the woman knows she has power, so that is where the problem is coming from. Nigerian men come here, they don't want to change, and they still want to be Nigerian men in another environment. So that is what causes the problem. In Nigeria, you work, I work. I come back from work, straight to the kitchen. While you sit down, I do everything. It is different over here, unlike Nigeria, where the man will say, "I am the one paying rent, I am giving you money for this and that," but here both of you are doing it together. So, the woman also expects, "If I can change and also be contributing to the home, you too change, help me around the house. Don't just sit down there and be saying 'I am the head of the home'."

Tolu's account of marital conflict, "if the man still behaves as if they are in Nigeria, there is bound to be a problem," opens the most theoretically dense terrain in this study. What she describes is a collision between two gender orders. The first is the Nigerian patriarchal order that the men have internalised and brought with them. The second is the Canadian gender order that the women begin to inhabit and instrumentalise once they discover, in Tolu's words, that "this place favours women more than men." Afro-feminism cautions against reading this collision as simply the progressive Canadian gender order defeating its retrograde Nigerian counterpart (Hussein 2024). Such a reading would reproduce the colonial logic that positions Africa as the site of gender backwardness and the West as its corrective. What the findings more precisely reveal is that both gender orders are systems of power that women must navigate rather than choose between. The Canadian context does not liberate these women from patriarchy. It offers them a different set of institutional levers, legal rights, employment equity, and social services with which to renegotiate their position within ongoing patriarchal arrangements. Crucially, the women who experience the most acute conflict are often those who have provisionally adopted Canadian gender norms while their partners have not, producing what amounts to a household-level culture war in which the woman bears the physical, emotional, and economic costs. Afro-feminism, with its insistence on the intersections of race, class, and colonial gender formations, compels us to ask not only why the men refuse to change, but what structural supports (economic marginalisation, racialised emasculation in the Canadian labour market, the absence of male community networks) make the patriarchal household the last terrain on which immigrant Nigerian men feel sovereign (Okeke-Ihejirika, Punjani and Salami 2022). The violence and divorce that sometimes follow are therefore not merely personal failures but symptoms of intersecting structural pressures that policy frameworks focused on gender equity alone are ill-equipped to address.

From the foregoing, it is evident that there are women who find it very difficult to balance work and life in Canada. This is usually in cases of seriously conflicting and irreconcilable roles and expectations. For migrant women who moved to Canada with clear aspirations and goals, this imbalance leads to tension, disappointments, and challenges. As a result, many are forced

to abandon their original aspirations, such as education, to prioritise family responsibilities.

Conclusion

This article shows that Nigerian women, as a case study of African women, continue to bear the greater burden of family and domestic duties even abroad, which calls for a redefinition of women's roles in the home to create more equal roles. Strenuous family life can hinder women's career progression due to traditional gender inequality in childcare and family chores, which is perpetrated abroad, resulting in fewer work hours for women. Also, inflexible work hours can make it difficult for women to balance their work and family responsibilities. This pressure may result in conflict within the family. As more women become part of the workforce, there is a need for organisations and society to recognise their important role in supporting family development and to provide appropriate support.

Migration is a multifaceted complex social reality that affects every sector of society today. While international migration has positive impacts, gender equality and equity in migration spaces remains crucial if women are to reap the full benefits of migration. Findings in this article show clearly that women migrants continue to experience many challenges, even in developed countries of destination. These challenges have serious negative consequences for the women who must innovate and adapt by adopting coping mechanisms that they do not necessarily find easy. Policies, programmes and scholarship therefore need to pay greater attention to the gendered dimensions of international migration and the unequal burdens they impose.

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A Black Sense of Place: A Cartographic Conversation with Katherine McKittrick

Christine Vogt-William and Stefan Ouma

Introduction

This keynote conversation took place between Black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick (Queen's University, Canada), economic geographer Stefan Ouma (University of Bayreuth, Germany) and literary and cultural studies scholar Christine Vogt-William (University of Bayreuth, Germany) at the 2023 annual conference of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence at the University of Bayreuth.[i,ii] The conversation took Professor McKittrick's highly acclaimed book, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (2021) as its point of departure at a time when other prominent scholars had also called for productive encounters between African Studies and Black Studies (e.g., Daley and Murrey 2022). McKittrick, Ouma, and Vogt-William are invested in mapping out reflections applicable to the transdisciplinary field of African Studies. The term "field" reflects the spatial nature of African Studies as comprising a plethora of knowledge production sites with epistemic perspectives from geopolitical and geophysical locations on the African continent and its diverse diasporas, challenging the colonial origins and hegemonic modes of knowledge production. The conversation considers knowledge production processes and research practices from specifically Black spatialising vantage points, which Ouma and Vogt-William identify as salient to productively disrupting African Studies as an intellectual and political field.

Dear Science and Other Stories (2021) combines poetic approaches with an erudite Black epistemic politics concerned with how Black diasporic communities, implementing the optics of "Black," have worked through geographic expressions of white supremacy. Here the term "Black" conveys more nuanced political, poetic, and intellectual ways of being, rather than functioning as a mere racial category grounded in colonial logics. Thus, this

conversation sounded and mapped distinct Black epistemic values through intersectional readings of power relations in structural, cultural, and disciplinary sites of knowledge production (Collins and Bilge 2018, 7–11). Notably, the concept of the intersection and its accompanying sociopolitical and epistemic identity vectors are, in and of themselves, spatialising metaphors. As members of the Africa Multiple Cluster, whose mission is "Reconfiguring African Studies," both scholars engage with the entanglements of the arts and the sciences in this valuable book. In their own moves towards reconfiguring from distinct diasporic perspectives, Ouma and Vogt-William consider the potentialities of envisioning, and perhaps even generating, African Studies research paradigms and practices more aligned with the multi-local and the multi-vocal intersections of "a Black sense of place" where power is scrutinised, navigated, negotiated, resisted, and reclaimed.

Four "hooks" emerged from the conversation: 1) the expression, "a Black sense of place" runs like a refrain through *Dear Science and Other Stories*; 2) intersectionality is deployed both as a mode of critical praxis and as an analytical tool; 3) Black historicity is understood in terms of the spatiotemporal relations between the African continent and its diasporas, and the colonial nature of African Studies should therefore also be approached from the perspective of Black historicity; and 4) reconfiguring African Studies is meant to engender Afrofuturist visions grounded in "a Black sense of place." With these hooks, Ouma and Vogt-William continue an "unfinished conversation" (Akomfrah 2012) about "doing African Studies with African scholars" as a process of "becoming," a "product of history, memories […] public and private perceptions," resonating with McKittrick's reading of diaspora as "doing"—that is, as method.[iii] Conscious of their own positionalities, situated knowledges and loci of enunciation, Ouma and Vogt-William embark on a process-oriented "cartographic conversation," a collaborative mapping exercise aligned with a decolonial sensibility. In conclusion, McKittrick provides a final commentary to Ouma and Vogt-William's reflections from her own Black Canadian diasporic perspective.

Taking Soundings of *Dear Science and Other Stories*

How to think about the relationship between space and knowledge and why this requires a radical transdisciplinary approach

Katherine McKittrick (KM): I think one of the key questions or connections that I make in Dear Science… is between disciplinary knowledge and the production of space. After I completed Demonic Grounds (2006), I became incredibly interested in methodologies and thinking about how disciplinary knowledge—especially, but not only, in the academy—was a kind of mapping exercise. If we look at the establishments of departments or departmentalisation, if we look at the history of how the university was built more broadly and what it does to contain knowledge, we can observe that knowledge and space are demarcated and produced simultaneously. We can think of just the bones of an academic institution: hallways, signs, office spaces, labs, and how they produce a kind of spatial footprint that is entangled with knowledge.

In my field, I have always told this as a joke, but it is not a joke. In my "interdiscipline," which is Black Studies and Gender Studies, some anti-racists have bigger offices than other anti-racists. And I have thought a lot about that for many years in terms of who gets funding and why, from the federal government, and how that upholds a particular type of knowledge that is not anticolonial, for example. Once we make this connection between knowledge and space, we can momentarily open the ways that radical interdisciplinary knowledges or radical interdisciplinarity can possibly destabilise this logic.

For me, when we are doing our best interdisciplinary work, we are not setting up a camp or bordering our knowledge systems. We are not resting comfortably within the walls of an already existing and calcified knowledge world, which for many of us is often the academy. We are seeking out ways to enact or write about or struggle toward liberation and it can be incredibly painful and uncomfortable to breach those existing knowledge systems. So, fields like African Studies, Caribbean Studies, Asian Studies, or "other" kinds of "area studies" disciplines hold a special currency in the academy […].

So, in *Dear Science...* and across my research in the field of geography, I have tried to point out and build on momentary destabilisations. And one way to do this is to work through and draw attention to the ways Black Studies is inherently interdisciplinary. We consider how African Studies is nested in this interdisciplinary project through the diaspora and through anticolonial activities that are produced within the context of the continent itself. This is the work of producing intellectual and creative works that refuse nation, borders, nationalism, white supremacy, and racism. I guess this is a long way of saying that *Dear Science...* is less interested in producing or upholding a field of knowledge that might have a magical answer to our oppressive academic fields. Also, it is worth repeating that interdisciplinary fields are also incredibly oppressive. They are not magical. They are also incredibly exclusionary, so I am less interested in producing a field of knowledge that will "fix" our oppressive academic fields and more interested in activities that unsettle the geographic traces that make those fields possible.

Hook One: The Expression "A Black Sense of Place" Runs Like a Refrain Through Dear Science and Other Stories

KM: […] One of my favourite ways to think about Black geographies is through relationality […]. A Black sense of place […] is an ongoing concept and it is my attempt to think about "diaspora as method." […] A Black sense of place is a provisional method precisely because it is relational […]. Édouard Glissant taught us that relation is not easy or fun or knowable (Glissant 1997) […]. If relation and relationality are sets of activities that change or mutate according to context, a Black sense of place […] is not about who we are but where we know from. This must remain terrifyingly open—it has to be open to change, open to failure, and that the liberatory promise that we are working toward may never be realised, and so, relationality allows us to think about liberation or freedom as a process, rather than as a goal or an outcome. […] You know, I am thinking as well about Edward Soja's Third Space (2003) […], and all of these ways of thinking about producing knowledge with an outcome that is not something that we can grasp, but rather something that we do […].

Hook Two: Intersectionality as a Mode of Critical Praxis and as an Analytical Tool

KM: Intersectionality […] is a useful framework to talk about the doing of anticolonial work, particularly if we insist that intersectionality is not stable but stretchy, rather than implying that it is an unchanging analytical frame that you can apply in the same way across time and space. […] The brilliance of Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality and her gift is […] that it shifts according to place (1991). And she uses the crossroads as her metaphor, and so, if we believe […] that metaphors always have material traces in them, then she is talking about roads and crossroads […] where the unresolved contradiction of Black womanhood resides but crossroads shift according to time and place; a crossroad in Canada is different from a crossroad in Germany. […] What if we think of intersectionality as a place and not a person? […] It is hard because we live in a world where we are supposed to resolve things, where intersectionality is the answer that […] will give us liberation. And so, it is a struggle, and holding on to that struggle is not easy for me. I do not think it is easy for anyone. We are looking for a way to resolve our agony, and we may not be able to do so.

Hook Three: Black Historicity is Understood as Spatiotemporal Relations Between the African Continent and Its Diasporas

KM: One of my favourite books is Simone Browne's *Dark Matters* (2015) and one of my favourite quotations comes at the very end of that book, which is her question: What happens "[w]hen Blackness enters the frame"? (161) and what happens, of course, is that the place and space change.

When Blackness enters a room, a store, or a countryside, these places and spaces shift affectively, psychically, and even physically. They become laden with new or different meanings precisely because Blackness holds in it all kinds of complicated histories and struggles that illuminate both Black and non-Black intimacies. Dionne Brand has a very famous, almost over-quoted line from *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2023), where she says, "history is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives." (25). Imagine writing that, imagine what it took to think that through and what history is sitting there when a Black person enters the room. […] It can be both

liberatory and unsettling at the same time. […] When I talk about asymmetrical knowledge systems, I am thinking about the entanglements between Black and non-Black communities, which are unevenly expressed and lived. And how Blackness, which carries this monumental history of oppression, resistance and liberation within it, reshapes how we make place. Therefore, while it holds within itself these anticolonial possibilities, they are not guaranteed […] But that struggle to expose those contradictions is incredibly important in terms of place-making. Thus, it is not just about what happens when Blackness enters the frame, but it is also about how Black folks experientially, empirically, and optically engage the frame. What do they do? The important thing for me always, in addition to grounding ourselves in material geographies, is what kind of activities are taking place in those frames or in those geographies that seem to be so static? How do Black folks agentively remake place and space even if this is at the level of the imagination? Because the imagination and the psyche are geographic scales.

Hook Four: Reconfiguring African Studies is Meant to Engender Afrofuturist Visions—From "A Black Sense of Place"

KM: I think "African space" can be thought of in several ways. I would like to think of it through a kind of borderless understanding of the continent of Africa, not "Africa is a country" but as a site of movements and migrations and struggles for liberation […] In terms of geography, one way to get at this is to undo our allegiance to colonial thinking, where the nation-state is commonsense. What if the borders of Africa are simultaneously strict and porous? […] African space does some important conceptual work for us in terms of reconfiguring how to live on this planet ethically and in relation to diaspora and diasporic conditions. In this way, those moments of incredibly violent exile—such as the transatlantic slavery—redefines the continent of Africa and moves dynamically, across time and space, and allows us to think about more contemporary migrations of African communities to North America and Europe.

Refractions of a "Black Sense of Place"

Christine Vogt-William (CVW): It is good to reconnect. I want to dwell on a certain memory where we were both involved in setting up a transnational, transcontinental, transdisciplinary discussion at the Africa Multiple Cluster's Spatialities conference in October 2023. The highlight foregrounded at that conference for me was Professor Katherine McKittrick's conversation with the two of us on *Dear Science and Other Stories*. As a literary and cultural studies scholar invested in Black feminist thought as well as intersectional and critical diversity literacy approaches, her work pointed out to me the productivity of combining poetic approaches and attention to language together with an erudite Black epistemic politics, which looks at how space works in allowing bodies to move, voices to articulate, minds to think, and imaginations to flourish. So, I would like to hook up to that conversation and hear your thoughts as well. How do you, as an economic geographer, relate to such a complex text like *Dear Science…*?

Stefan Ouma (SO): I really enjoyed the conversation with Professor McKittrick. I am an economic geographer originally interested in agrarian transformations, so some of her earlier work on the plantation (McKittrick 2013) has been very important for me to rethink my own work, which has always focused on plantation type of agriculture.[iv] But especially in the early days, I had never approached it with the plantation as a category in mind that had been firmly shaped by Black Studies scholars, by scholars from the Caribbean, by scholars from Latin America; also scholars from Asia and Africa. Her previous work was very important for me in this regard, and it was already quite interdisciplinary. It emerged in conversations with Sylvia Wynter and Clive Woods, another important Black geographer who has worked a lot on the American South[v,vi]. And I think *Dear Science…* is a kind of radical extension of these works because it is really a wild ride across different genres and disciplines. It is very experimental, but it is still held together by an ethos and attitude. That's why *Dear Science…* is an important work for everyone who wants to transgress different types of boundaries: that is, to break down silos between African Studies, Caribbean Studies and other Afro-diasporic Studies that are usually associated with different territories but also disciplinary boundaries.

CVW: This wild ride is exactly why I enjoyed it so much because she talks about space in all its intersectional nuances. Here I would like to take up the four hooks that we were able to distil for our conversation. The strongest hook for me was this Black sense of place, and that runs like a refrain through *Dear Science...* and it vibes with what you said just now about McKittrick's work about the plantation. And I am referencing a removal of the space of the plantation away from that colonial conception of plantation culture and politics, which shapes a place of death connected to the practice of forced labour, which then has shaped the entire strategy of dehumanisation of Black people. This is firmly ingrained in Black history: to remember this is one of those colonial wounds that still are part of how the space of the plantation is still thought and imagined (and here I am thinking of Grada Kilomba's 2010 study *Plantation Memories*).[vii] What is interesting about McKittrick's work for me is that she takes the space of that plantation and scaffolds it with a different set of parameters, which then resounds with this idea of a mobilisation of a Black imagination of that particular history, marked by the space of the plantation, as a possible means to re-imagine what Black creativity can be, what Black memory work can be, how Black trauma work processes these types of generational memory, and also what Black agency can mean. I am thinking about how that could be infused with the idea of Black life as a flourishing, resilient parameter, rather than the dated associations of the plantation as a place that fosters a culture of death. And here I am also thinking about Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* (2019), which is a strong indictment of how colonial thinking basically decided that one set of people were to be allowed the dignity of life and another set of people were not even meant to dream of life, let alone a good life. These are some of the initial associations and resonances that occurred to me when thinking about Katherine McKittrick's "Black sense of place", in relation to what you just said about plantation space. You are more of an expert in this, seeing as you have looked at plantation economy and agrarian parameters in that context. So, your ideas of a Black sense of place will likely come from a different disciplinary and political locus of enunciation?

SO: These are very good points. In the interview that we transcribed, she says the Black sense of place is her attempt to think about diaspora as method. It is not about who we are, but where we know from. And I think these are two very

important statements, because it really shows that the concept was developed from a diasporic perspective. It brings together thinking about place and knowledge and power geometries. And I found it very useful. Even before Dear Science… was out, I had worked with the concept at an event I was invited to in Frankfurt a few years ago by the Initiative for Black People in Germany.[viii] They had asked me to provide input on Black urban life, and I just want to read out what I made of McKittrick's concept of a Black sense of place—how I reappropriated it from an Afro-German diasporic perspective. But I also want to make the point that you can build bridges from there to many other geographic contexts, including the African context. It might become a little bit more complicated, because some African colleagues might think Blackness is not a category they can work with or relate to. I know a critical Kenyan colleague who once told me he became Black when he came to Germany, and now he is into Black Studies and connected matters. It is not necessarily a category that everyone shares, but I think it is very useful. My input back then was as follows:

> How do you walk; how do you talk; how do you make yourself heard? How do you work; how do you love? How do you celebrate? How do you encounter the police? How do you school? How do you play? How do you rent a flat? How do you claim space? How do you talk back? How do you die? Obviously, you would hear very different answers to these questions from white people and even among Black people. Answers to these questions might differ despite some shared lived experiences that tie us together. Why these differences? This gap is firmly related to the power geometries of places—not spaces, the abstract thing lying out there; places: what we make of space through our lived experiences, our building efforts, our imaginations, our ideologies, our narratives. And there is a power geometry to all these processes, because historical forms of anti-Black violence, racialised practices of society and economy making, and projects of white supremacy shape what Black people experience as place.

My input could not have been possible without Katherine's work; hence, I think that this hook is a real reminder of the usefulness of this category.

CVW: I find that what you have just cited from your own input back then also resonates with me as a person with a South(east) Asian diasporic life context here in Germany. While my life in Germany evinces certain interesting points of connection with Black diasporic experiences, I am not going to say that

both types of diasporic experience are the same—they are not. But I do look out for points of connection that enable conversation as somebody who identifies as double diasporic, having been born and brought up in Singapore, and then living in diaspora there as part of an Indian minority, and then coming to Germany and living a minoritised life here. Having said that, I am grateful to have found extremely convivial, generous, and fruitful relationships with Black feminist communities in Germany and in the UK. Hence, the questions that you have raised resonate in very complex intersectional ways for me, as a non-Black and a non-white person of South(east) Asian origins and ancestry, doing the work that I do as a German woman scholar of colour. Hence, I might bring a slightly different spin to understanding what a Black sense of place could be. And here I want to come back to what McKittrick said during our conversation: that this place must remain terrifyingly open—to change, to failure —and that the liberatory promise that we are working toward may never be realised, whereby relationality allows us to think about liberation or freedom as a process, rather than as a goal or as an outcome. Indeed, I think these are concerns pertinent to many Germans of "migratory background" in different ways. The question of freedom is also something that bears scrutiny in our current times as well, when we think about the types of unfreedom that are being imposed on us from various positions. At the same time, how would I as a South(east) Asian German woman of colour, then relate to something that terrifyingly open to change and failure? How might I then relate to a Black sense of place within these frames? For me, the questions of institutional and societal discriminations are matters requiring engagement in the German context. It also colours my view on how German majority society actually practises modes of inclusivity (in varying degrees) towards those of us who are racialised, gendered, and classed, who are identified by the majority society as "bodies from the other side of the world," to use Sara Ahmed's words (2006, 121), and also how we are also viewed as "dissonant bodies," following Nirmal Puwar (2004, 32; see also Galetto, Martucci and Puwar 2024)—bodies who, by their intersectional complexity, thus already generate modes of discomfort for the majority society. Does this complexity then also infuse a Black sense of place and, if so, is this a uniform infusion of that Black sense of place? I rather think not. You would have a different sort of approach to this Black sense of place, but you would also see points of

connection to what I was just trying to articulate as a double diasporic. The conscious embrace then of this idea of a Black sense of place for me is due to my own intellectual debt to Black feminist thinking, which contributed considerably to my own epistemic trajectory as an academic. I know we are not supposed to say we are "activists" because we are all supposed to be "objective," but given the current climate, I have to say the question of objectivity itself also needs to be interrogated from a Black sense of place. I want to also add that, as a South(east) Asian diasporic, working with a South(east) Asian diasporic sense of place might also connect with the Black sense of place to instigate important conversations. I would say those conversations are necessary, especially since 2025 was the 80th anniversary of the Bandung Conference. Many non-Black scholars of colour might find themselves in that complex and often very uncomfortable position that could be still operationalised by colonial agents today to implement the divide-and-conquer politics among racialised colonised people used in the past that Vijay Mishra talks about in his *The Darker Nations* (2008, 44). And I think this is part of the larger colonial wound addressed in this conversation, when we try to elucidate what a Black sense of place could mean for each of us in ourselves.

SO: I think you raised two very important points here. You mentioned her statement that liberation/freedom is a process rather than an event, a goal or outcome. And I think the current revanchist white supremacist type of backlash is [a] real reminder of this. Trump and those of his ilk really want to go back to a certain time. But I think McKittrick's statement also relates to the work of another Black feminist scholar, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who says freedom is a place (Gilmore 2023). So, what you just mentioned about your own positionality bears reflecting on how, when you move around, work, etc., you face your own experiences, which can be read with a Black sense of place in mind, but these experiences are still distinct. Even with folk who may relate to a Black sense of place in more straightforward ways, there are huge differences. Therefore, I think that the concept is a reminder about bringing in place as a process but not forgetting positionality and power geometries. And contingent on this, I see McKittrick addressing intersectionality in one of her other hooks. And I just wondered what you made of her take on intersectionality in the interview?

CVW: When I asked her how she considers intersectionality in her own work, she stated that intersectionality is not stable—that it is stretchy, rather than implying that it is unchanging. And she says that the brilliance in Kimberlé Crenshaw's development of the theoretical approach of intersectionality is that it shifts according to place. The notable aspect is the "inter-" of the intersection, which is transported in the theory of intersectionality—this is essentially a spatial metaphor. We are talking about an intersection —a crossroads, which can be considered a contact zone, a node, and a mode of encounter. It can be seen as a space of conflict, where entities might negotiate or intend to continue a chosen trajectory, and could find themselves impeded or enabled (see Crenshaw 1989, 149 –152; also, Crenshaw 1991, 1244–1245; 1299). So here, McKittrick addresses the spatiality of the intersection, which I want to connect with Henri Lefebvre's ideas of lived space, perceived space, and conceived space (2013). Hence, we see this idea of the intersection working in all three instances, sometimes simultaneously. McKittrick also says here that Crenshaw uses the crossroads as a metaphor, which will always have material traces in it—thus the actual physicality of roads and crossroads are referenced in this theory—which McKittrick then leaves open for us to engage with as we wish. Here McKittrick considers the lived, perceived, and the conceived aspects of space, where she talks about how the unresolved contradiction of Black womanhood resides at a crossroads, which shifts according to time and place: "a crossroads in Canada is different from a crossroads in Germany." This is part of McKittrick's poetic navigation, which demonstrates a salient disciplinary and conceptual boundary crossing. For me, this illustrates how McKittrick herself has embraced that terrifying openness to imagining freedom and invites us into that conversation around intersectionality. While she finds it expansive and elastic, she does not allow conceptual borders to intimidate her from exploring the metaphoricity of the physical crossroads and roads, leading into the phenomenological and philosophical ideas of Black womanhood being trammelled by multiple modes of power dynamics regarding race, class, and gender. While referencing Crenshaw's work, McKittrick talks about how this theory also travels. Such theoretical travelling entails how intersectional outlooks, experiences, and oppressions, could be very different in Canada, as opposed to how it manifests here in Germany. When we think about a Black sense of place for our work then, we might want to consider Germany as a diasporic space in process,

when McKittrick talks about diaspora as doing—as method. So, there is a sense of continuity, a sense of historicity, where she does not aim for closure. These are some of the valuable insights on intersectionality that I found in *Dear Science…*, which McKittrick cogently expanded on during our conversation.

SO: McKittrick then gives intersectionality this material twist, whereby, in an additive understanding of intersectionality, you may have race, class, gender, etc., and then place is added as an additional variable. But McKittrick effectively spatialises intersectionality by emphasising its multiplicative complexities (see also Tamale 2020, 250) when space is considered with race, gender, class etc., to produce places intersected by these identity vectors (among others), where power is exerted, (re)claimed, negotiated, resisted. I think in the very beginning, when she talks about the relationship between knowledge and space, she occasionally wonders why certain anti-racists, certain feminists, have larger offices—larger workspaces, than others. Thus, even with people in the same progressive group, you see fractures and differences, and these acquire expression in terms of a certain materiality, which then shapes the agency of people.

CVW: And that materiality is infused with power.

SO: Exactly, it is infused with power. My feeling was also that it is a more unusual take on intersectionality. Would you agree with this, given your broad experience with the concept? Or would you say it merely brings something to the surface that many other people writing on intersectionality already have in mind, but just do not address in the same way?

CVW: I see it in two different frames. On the one hand, McKittrick basically names the materiality of how intersectionality works. And she connects the philosophical question of place here with the idea of diaspora as doing, as method, as process, where she literally shows us how space is infused with power and how these discourses of race, class, and gender congeal around certain bodies who mark the space of the conceived intersection. On the other

hand, in real time in the material world, experiences of intersectional oppression take place, which we understand as structural discrimination due to the politicising of bodies through race, class, and gender. So, what I get out of McKittrick's reading of intersectionality is that while you have this conceived space of the crossroads where power operates, you also have specific bodies who embody those crossroads as well, and that opens a wonderfully complex layer. This interrogates how we look at racialised, gendered, and classed bodies embodying certain spatial mobility practices, which raises vexed questions about how these bodies belong to certain spaces or not, and here I am alluding to the idea of citizenship. I find this Black feminist geographical approach to intersectionality an extremely creative and elastic one, which moves us towards unravelling a more productive implementation of intersectionality theory in our own scholarship. I am not saying intersectionality is perfect—I do not think Crenshaw or the other intersectional pioneer Black feminist scholars meant for it to be perfect (and I would ask: by whose standards?). McKittrick pinpoints one of the biggest advantages of this theoretical trajectory: its adaptiveness, its stretchability, its expansiveness, and this is a good example of how she works with her own idea of a Black sense of place. So, for me, this would encourage more nuanced enquiries into how intersectionality works in spaces like Canada and Germany, for example. How does this work in a space like Trinidad and Tobago? Or India? Or Singapore? In African countries? This opens more points of engagement for us to actually engage with that thick, rich, and varied scholarship around intersectionality in our various disciplines. In this, I believe that McKittrick has given us a means to set intersectionality theory itself on a more liberatory trajectory.

SO: I just want to return to the first hook, where she talks about the relationship between knowledge and space, which are demarcated and produced simultaneously. Here she takes the office of an academic institution as an example for this and certain power geometries central to this, right at the intersection of both space and knowledge. And I just want to extend this a little bit from her academic context in Canada to other spaces. You could replace the office with a plantation or the factory floor or the hotel (e.g., in Kenya's tourism sector). You often cannot think of such spaces without considering colonial legacies. Some would go as far as saying that highly

digitised work environments can be connected to surveillance regimes on plantation work, because current technologies allow you to objectify labour to an extent which has not been possible for a long time, unless you have full control over labour, as during the age of enslavement (Ouma and Premchander 2022). For me, McKittrick's take on knowledge and space is relevant for the study of concrete places. But it is also a call to transcend narrow spatial frames: any place being studied is always embedded in larger relationships. One also should be willing to transcend narrow disciplinary views in studying certain practices or places. For example, a transatlantic take on "modern" agriculture in different African continental contexts would be generative, since insights from Caribbean Studies, and studies around plantations in the American South and Latin America would be cogent templates to enable studying what goes on in other parts of the world. For me, McKittrick's work is an invitation to embrace what geographers Patricia Daley and Amber Murrey have recently called for in their paper on "defiant scholarship": that African geographies and Black Studies, as intellectual fields, need to be brought into conversation (Daley and Murrey 2022). Having enjoyed her thinking about knowledge and space, I will conclude this reflection with another important bit from the first hook, where McKittrick asks: who gets funding and why from the federal government, and how does that uphold a particular type of knowledge that is not anticolonial? At the present moment, with Trump and his revanchist white supremacy project in mind, this question becomes even more pertinent (Hamilton 2020; Inwood 2019). I believe she probably was thinking about the old funding landscape when she phrased this, where some anti-racists just get more money than others. There are good reasons for that. But now, with the Trump regime's straightforward attacks on American academic institutions, that reflection takes on a level of gravitas.

CVW: I think the conversation about knowledge production is definitely highly relevant in our current times, and, for me, McKittrick can be considered almost prophetic in bringing up that particular aspect in 2023. Back then, I do not think any of us had ever imagined that there would be a US president who would launch a full-scale attack on academic freedom and higher education institutions in a country where they have always enjoyed a very strong reputation in scholarship excellence—which, of course, is

something that Germany's own higher education branding is very much invested in. In the abstract sense then, we are not necessarily referencing the actual physical place of a university itself, but rather the idea of higher education institutions. Which bodies within this space actually have the types of knowledge that are considered most valuable and should be consistently supported; that is, provided with resources, infrastructure, personnel, and so on? We would want to ask which disciplines have been the bulwark, the mainstay of setting up the preferred types of knowledge frameworks that everyone ascribes to in the frame of "excellence scholarship." In this frame, then, we note that the space where knowledge is produced itself is highly politicised. We have had that argument going on here in German higher education institutions for a fair few years now. I would say, in the last ten years, it has come out in public—the fact that those with definitional authority in German higher education spaces were making statements like: "We only do objective and rational knowledge production. We do not do identity politics; we do not entertain ideologies. This is a place of academic freedom." So, it is interesting to see now how the discourse in and around German university spaces demonstrates an increasing awareness of the politicisation of higher education. This position also bears some scrutiny in light of the very visible rise of the far right, which has its repercussions not only in the greater German sociopolitical context. Such developments can have ramifications for German higher education institutions as regards funding policies, the preference for and promotion of certain disciplines, the marginalisation of certain types of knowledge, how faculty is put together, how hiring practices are set up, which bodies can be considered experts in their respective fields, and so on. Thus, the politicisation of German university space demonstrates which bodies have been allowed access to these spaces, which bodies have been allowed to exercise their expertise and have actively contributed to how disciplines have been shaped, how teaching and research have been shaped, what types of impact research activity has had on the greater sociopolitical context, how resources are distributed. The materiality of space is referenced when we talk about offices, furniture, and appliances, considering who has the better coffee machine, computer hardware or other facilities. So how are certain bodies expected to use these spaces? How do we address the interrogation of power in these particular spaces? Do we see a need to change how these spaces have

been shaped? Because the way these spaces are shaped also influences how and by whom knowledge is being produced. So why is it that when it comes to scholars of colour and Black scholars in German higher education spaces, it appears quite difficult for many to imagine a Black woman scholar as a professor, as an expert in their field? Why is it a matter of surprise to see a woman scholar of colour giving a lecture? There are interesting reactions and behaviours that merit interrogating how this particular society sees itself, and how the same society shapes these spaces. Of course, these questions merit deeper engagement, and that will probably require more research, but I just want to articulate this idea of how knowledge and space and bodies interrelate, and that the entire relationship is infused by power dynamics. This is often forgotten or not even registered in the higher education context here in Germany (often due to the notion of flat hierarchies): that structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal power dynamics are all interlocked and shape each other. How are German culture and its symbolic value being understood and mobilised in the German university space? How does that power accrue to structures within the university? What kind of power does German culture have? Who actually then embodies German culture and German structural power in the university space? When it comes to disciplinary power, we can understand "disciplinary" in two ways: 1) how we exert the power of definition on our particular academic disciplines, and 2) how certain bodies in the regimented and hierarchical space, like the German university, are disciplined to do certain things that are expected of them. So how do cultural power and structural power then exert their impacts on certain bodies? How are these bodies contributing to the shaping of the academic disciplines?

Let us look at the Africa Multiple Cluster with its remarkable agenda of reconfiguring African Studies by doing African Studies with African scholars. But who defines African Studies in Bayreuth and the Cluster at large and who are the African scholars that Africa Multiple would like to engage with? Do they—researchers and research agendas—come straight from the continent, or might they also somehow or other be involved in diasporic contexts? Which African scholars and what kinds of research agendas and theoretical approaches are deemed desirable?

SO: I just want to connect the two things you said with her fourth hook, where she talks about Black historicity as a spatial and temporal relation between the African continent and its diasporas. So, the revanchist project we have been seeing going on for several years now, with liberal, conservative and far-right forces partly united in trying to push back progressive (epistemic and social justice) agendas, including critical race theory and gender studies. In Germany, demonising a so-called "postcolonialism" spectre supposedly running rampant in German academia has become a fashion (Ouma 2024). Isn't that move actually about installing some sort of provincialism, so that a tightly demarcated take on German history from a majority perspective is the only one imaginable? But you might see this type of provincialism in the domain of African Studies as well (see Clapham 2020). Katherine McKittrick is working against such provincialism by asking, together with Simone Browne, what happens when Blackness enters the frame? What happens if you study extractivism in the mining industry in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and you bring in Blackness as a register (see Sithole 2020),[ix] as a prism? What happens if you study labour relations in the tourism sector in Kenya and you bring in Blackness? In this vein, I think this is again encouragement to adopt transdisciplinary and transgeographical approaches in knowledge production practices.

CVW: I find that a very fraught conversation, but I am very grateful that McKittrick raised it, because one of the challenges that I have been confronted with as the Director of Gender and Diversity here in the Africa Multiple Cluster here in Bayreuth was the strong conviction that Blackness has nothing to do with Africa. With regard to the question of whiteness and Blackness—it's always fascinating to see how white scholars keep disavowing whiteness, and then, by extension, disavowing Blackness, while using phrases like "we are all human beings." I find this a rather wilful move towards a certain amnesia of actual colonial relations based on racial hierarchies, which still reverberate today in the way societies are organised, in the way institutions organise and function, in the way resources are distributed, in the way definitional authority is accorded to certain bodies. As a non-Black feminist scholar of colour, I am very careful, since I can only speak from an outsider position in relation to Blackness (and this depends very much on how Blackness is defined), and I have been able to learn through my conversations

with Black scholars and those who identify as African if they do not identify as Black. This can be a vexed and uncomfortable space of articulation, because it also calls for the agency of self-designation (see also Crenshaw 1991, 1297; and Vogt-William 2025, 75fn2). It can be challenging for those who ascribe to decolonial thinking, especially when it comes to interrogating racial hierarchies, where we do not want to reify phenotypical difference as an organising principle, because of the discrimination, the suffering, and the oppression that arises from this. But at the same time, there is something to be said for self-definition, where Black scholars, activists, and artists have reclaimed the designation of Blackness, in order to imbue it with their own specific forms of multilateral agency. So, should one then perhaps ascribe to many Black senses of place? This then also raises the question of how somebody like me can form, practise, and implement my allyship with Black colleagues, Black artists, Black scholars, many of whom have become close to me and are part of my diasporic space in Germany, where I find my own community of practice to inculcate a sense of German belonging, which is different from a white majority understanding of what being "German" is, what German culture is. Am I then also operating from a connected Black sense of place by wanting to disrupt hegemonic white majority understandings of being "German" by aligning myself in community with Black scholars, colleagues, artists—many of whom are activists? Am I then also stretching this idea of a Black sense of place? Because, as I have read McKittrick, she intends this Black sense of place to be part of doing diaspora as method. Would diaspora then be as expansive and inclusive?

SO: This is a really important point that builds a bridgehead to the last hook McKittrick has offered us here, which squarely addresses the question of reconfiguring African Studies. It also gives that question an Afrofuturist thrust: how should the future then look like for McKittrick, in reconfiguring, rethinking, unsettling, as a community project, but also in creating a kind of borderless understanding of the continent of Africa, and how to make that current understanding of African space move beyond the continent by bringing in the diaspora? It may address allies from different parts of the world. How to make this an "African space"? McKittrick clearly says that kind of conceptual work is for us: to unsettle things, to reshape the world, including

our own academic practices. What did you make of her futurist take on the question of "reconfiguring African Studies"?

CVW My understanding is that McKittrick is clear that future thinking means change at several levels: personal, disciplinary, political, social, psychological—to address just a few contexts. Change is terrifying but necessary, and the spectre of failure will need to be confronted, especially when we are impatient for those changes to actually occur. But I would share a certain optimism with McKittrick in the sense of consistently working together in community, wherever we can find it, towards the vision for and realisation of Afrofutures that allow for more open and accountable types of relationality. There is still much to be done, definitely much to be learnt, and more conversations to be had.

KM: Wow. I have to begin by thanking you both for this conversation and your reflections on our 2023 discussion. I remember so clearly not being able to travel and the quick accommodation to hold my session online. I begin here because the setting was one of kindness, which we seemingly only have glimpses of in these terrible times. The context, as you both note, has changed in just two years. We are living in and through radical reconfigurations of space, place, location, wherein ecocide and genocide are exacted on the most vulnerable across scales. A Black sense of place is not what it was in 2023—it must be reimagined alongside Palestine and Sudan, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), just as we must remember how the plantation produced the conditions for authoritarianism and revolution and, as well, recognise how (and where) Palestine and Sudan and ICE were already, and forever, in our hearts. I am spinning, as I am certain you are. In Canada, anti-immigration policies are quietly shifting and calcifying, and in the USA, Trumpism is both reviled and desired, depending on your location. So, to riff on your comments above, the urgency is not a solution, per se, but rather how we live in this moment—where we each are—and find the courage to stretch and revise our intellectual work, our friendships, our creative acts, and our analytical attachments. I am so appreciative of your insights—our conversation here has pressed me to think even more about diaspora as method and what this might offer for demystifying and unsettling the seeming

impenetrability of white supremacy and the attendant global circuits of power that produce and reproduce geographies of harm. I think we agree that the work is daunting, but it is also terribly open and, as the abolitionists and anticolonial scholars and creatives teach us, we need to gather resources, make connections and friendships, revise, rewrite, remake, because this destabilising work is always already in the works (Gilmore 2022; Wynter 2003).

Notes

i While redacted for brevity with omissions are marked as […], the text combines excerpts from the original conversation for a post-interview cartographic conversation that also includes a brief reply by Professor McKittrick. We thank M Rossmeier for help with editing this piece.

ii Vogt-William's tenure as the Director of the Gender and Diversity Office of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence (first funding phase 2019–2025) ended on 31 December 2025. At the time of publishing this piece, Vogt-William is no longer a member of Africa Multiple, nor is she affiliated with the University of Bayreuth.

iii The Unfinished Conversation, for example, deals with identity not as an unambiguous creature or being but instead as a "becoming" that is in constant flux, a product of history, memories, and the intersection of public and private perception. One of the most influential proponents of this idea was the cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1932–2014), for whom identity and "ethnic" affiliation, rather than fixed terms, were components of an "unfinished conversation." See also John Akomfrah in conversation with Julia Grosse (Grosse and Baden 2023, 102).

iv In a seminal paper, McKittrick (2013, 3) underlines that "[the] plantation thesis uncovers the interlocking workings of modernity and blackness, which culminate in long-standing, uneven racial geographies while also centralizing that the idea of the plantation is migratory. Thus, in agriculture, banking, and mining, in trade and tourism, and across other colonial and postcolonial spaces—the prison, the city, the resort—

a plantation logic characteristic of (but not identical to) slavery emerges in the present both ideologically and material."

v In her introduction to Black Caribbean philosopher Sylvia Wynter's work, McKittrick observes, in relation to the ongoing multifarious struggles of global poverty as attributable to, but not limited to, just the economic: "Wynter thus calls for a solution that understands our global crises in relation to her correlated models of being human [...] and [...] for interrelated solutions to interrelated problems, rather than as singular and particular dilemmas that merely require singular and particular disciplinary solutions" (McKittrick 2015, 39).

vi In their co-edited volume Black Geographies, McKittrick and Woods unequivocally state: "a black sense of place and black geographic knowledges have both been undermined by hegemonic spatial practices […] and seemingly unavailable as a worldview. […] black geographies demand an interdisciplinary understanding of space and place-making that enmeshes, rather than separates different theoretical trajectories and spatial concerns" (McKittrick and Woods 2007, 7).

vii Kilomba considers how the past and the present operate in the placement of the Black subject: "[...] 'plantation' and 'memories' describes everyday racism as not only the restaging of the colonial past, but also as a traumatic reality, which has been neglected. It is a violent shock that suddenly places the Black subject in a colonial scene where, as in a plantation scenario, one is imprisoned as the subordinate and exotic "other." Unexpectedly, the past comes to coincide with the present, and the present is experienced as if one were in that agonizing past [...]" (2010, 13).

viii The Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland, founded in 1985, is a nationwide network working towards connecting Black people throughout the country. See ISD website.

ix In his 2020 volume The Black Register, South African political scientist Tendayi Sithole defines the Black register as "the ethical operation of blackness liberating itself in its own name. It is a register that does not border on the generality and the totality of the universal. Its specificity

[…] is bringing to the fore fundamental questions that must deal with the dehumanization of blackness" (2020, 6–7).

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Investigating Class Privilege Among Professional Ghanaian Migrants During COVID-19

Madeleine Wong

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced people across the world to grapple with insecurities and deep uncertainties while reworking and reconstituting social life in a globally linked "new normal." This study investigates how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the professional and personal lives of highly skilled Ghanaian migrant women and how they adapted to these challenges. Based on qualitative narrative interviews, the findings reveal that these women navigated crisis and precarity by mobilising local and transnational resources and adopting flexible mobility strategies. The paper demonstrates how gendered care expectations and mobility restrictions expose the friction between class privilege and vulnerability in reconfiguring transnational families.

Keywords: class privilege, skilled migration, COVID-19, gender and care work, transnational families

> It's not about the resources you have. It's about reorganising your life, which can be very, very difficult and challenging. – Ofeibea, civil servant (United Kingdom)

Situating COVID Disruptions for Skilled Migrants in Context

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants and their families has been well documented. Pandemic-driven government restrictions such as travel bans, quarantines, social distancing, and remote work mandates disrupted daily life. People were forced to recalibrate how they navigated mobility, professional obligations, and caregiving responsibilities. This literature highlighted a distinct divergence of experiences based on socioeconomic status, gender, and

migration legalities. Research on affluent migrants and privileged diasporas, however, is often eclipsed by studies of working-class diaspora and refugee experiences; the latter two frequently emphasise social exclusion and marginalisation. Recent studies have highlighted that pandemic-related control measures created substantial societal, financial, and structural obstacles for migrant workers in precarious situations, amplifying existing inequalities and worsening their situations (Koinova et al. 2023). Widening disparities compounded the power imbalances inherent in global caregiving networks and transnational care arrangements (Lutz 2018). There remains a critical gap in understanding how highly skilled individuals and migrants, especially Africans, navigated and responded to those challenges.

Research on the pandemic's effect on privileged demographics predominantly centres on three groups: international students, academic professionals, and skilled workers in healthcare, technology, and corporate sectors. The literature on international students, whose overseas studies represent key aspirations and strategies for upward economic mobility and capital accumulation, emphasised the disruptions to their mobility and well-being. This work examined how the obstruction of their mobility pathways deprived students of adequate social protection in host countries (Firang 2020; Levent and Aktaş 2023). These students faced sudden campus closures, visa precarity, financial instability, and isolation, with African students among the most exposed (Bimpong 2023; Chasi and Quinlan 2021). The transition to virtual instruction hindered their academic progress and increased psychological strain (Hari et al. 2023). Studies on how families of these students navigated transnational (im)mobilities highlighted a heavy reliance on digital connectivity to sustain cross-border ties; the transnational space became intensely *affective* (Filippou et al. 2026), as digital platforms served as both communication tools and critical infrastructure for psychological and moral support. As host countries often classified them as temporary residents, international students struggled to qualify for vital local relief resources when the pandemic hit. Female students, especially those with dependent family members faced compounded burdens of increased domestic care, heightened isolation, and financial precarity—forcing many to navigate complex compromises between their cultural expectations and their academic obligations (Skyum 2021). Families thus deployed risk-management strategies

to navigate the health risks faced by stranded students, the financial risks arising from disruptions to parents' local employment, and the logistical challenges of maintaining transnational support and care arrangements (Liu and Wu 2025; Wu and Del Rey Poveda 2025).

Another focal point of research on skilled professionals is the pandemic's disruptions for academic professionals. Global lockdowns necessitated a shift to remote work, which dissolved the traditional boundaries between professional duties and home life. This dissolution severely disrupted work-life balance and disproportionately impacted female academics, who struggled to balance demanding remote careers with caregiving and mothering responsibilities, producing anxiety and compromising their scholarly productivity (Bender et al. 2022; Frehiwot et al. 2022). These concessions prompted calls for an "ethics of care" to address structural gender inequalities in domestic labour and academic output (Branicki 2020). Broader research mirrored these domestic challenges, showing how the pandemic exacerbated intersecting inequalities across different regions and institutional hierarchies (Corbera et al. 2020; França et al. 2022; Heath et al. 2022).

Finally, scholarship on other highly skilled migrants explores how remote work paradigms and changing corporate expectations shape their professional and personal trajectories (Wang et al. 2025). Though spared the catastrophic job losses and severe housing precarity experienced by lower-skilled migrants, they faced nuanced challenges such as professional bottlenecks, legal anxieties, and what scholars call "privileged precarity" (Botterill 2017). Many retained employment and relative financial stability as they worked in tech, finance, and consulting, sectors readily adaptable to remote work. Skilled migrant health workers formed the backbone of the pandemic response globally, yet they faced systemic discrimination, credentialing barriers, and disproportionate infection rates (Showers 2023). At the same time, other skilled migrants remained vulnerable to downsizing in pandemic-hit sectors due to restrictive legal and visa status (Purkayastha and Roy 2023). With travel bans and suspended visa-processing, even family emergencies abroad risked leaving them stranded and jeopardising their jobs, homes, and status.

Although existing literature establishes gender as a primary driver of migration decisions and trends (McAuliffe and Bauloz 2024), the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic specifically impacted migrant populations, particularly highly skilled professionals, along gender and class lines, remains a glaring gap in current research. This paper addresses this gap by examining how skilled/professional Ghanaian migrant women reorganised their lives to navigate the disruptions engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining a sociocultural context where female employment is the cultural norm, this Ghanaian case study demonstrates how kinship plays a vital role in fostering women's empowerment, autonomy, and financial independence. Among the Akan, women are strongly encouraged to build their own economic resources and prioritise the well-being of their children over financial dependence on men (Clark 1999; Darkwah 2007; Salifu 2020). These norms shaped how women adapted their livelihood and caregiving strategies during COVID-19 as women's autonomy and decision-making agency demonstrated significant potential in cultivating equitable sharing of domestic and transnational familial responsibilities.

To examine how the pandemic restructured social life spatially and socially, I first present the guiding conceptual framework. After detailing the study context, methodology, and participant demographics, I analyse how skilled migrant women navigated shifting work conditions, care obligations, and migration decisions. I conclude by outlining the paper's contributions to debates on transnational care and skilled labour migration.

Conceptual Framework

This research is theoretically grounded in three interconnected frameworks: transnationalism and mobility, gendered geographies of social reproduction, and the contingent nature of class and capital. Migrant transnationalism describes how immigrants build and sustain networks linking their origin and destination societies, reflecting the lived experiences of diverse populations, spanning transnational families, students, labour migrants and refugees, who maintain continuous economic, social, and cultural ties across borders. This engagement establishes a relational space shaped by personal experiences and cultural bonds rather than the limits of the nation-state (Basch et al. 1994).

Transnational care has emerged as a vital and expanding sector of the global economy as families and care workers move across borders to provide and receive care. Research on transnational families traditionally centres migrant parents who send remittances to secure their children's futures primarily through funding education and providing emotional care (Cebotari et al. 2018; Parreñas 2005). Other research underscores transnational mobility patterns, specifically noting the patterns and frequency of parental visits home or the challenges of older parents visiting their emigrant children abroad (Ferreira 2025). Though shaped by temporary and circular flows, migration decisions are heavily influenced by family relations, and cultural norms and expectations. For globally dispersed families, staying connected requires navigating constant changes in politics, economy, technology, and health crises (Yeoh et al. 2024).

Much mobility research treats mobility and immobility as dichotomous processes. Bélanger and Silvey (2020) argue instead for an interconnected continuum that shapes the migrant experience. The pandemic exposed the fragility of global interconnectedness, what Nehring and Hu (2021) term "fragile transnationalism." State-driven pandemic interventions and the prioritisation of national interests disrupted international travel and support networks. This structural disruption trapped individuals with lives spanning multiple borders in a precarious state of "transnational limbo," deepening existing inequalities. Moreover, nuanced disparities emerged among different migrant populations due to variations in their social, economic, and cultural capital. Dobusch and Kreissl (2020) argue that pandemic mobility regimes were not neutral; they prioritised the movement of some (essential workers or high-status travellers) while immobilising others considered less valued or disposable, reinforcing prevalent inequality across class, gender, and migration status. For highly privileged, skilled migrants, the pandemic acted as both a barrier and an enabler of movement. Leveraging their substantial financial and social resources, these individuals were able to navigate travel restrictions, while restructuring their everyday lives and careers across virtual, domestic, and international spheres.

Historically assigned to women, social reproduction refers to the processes through which social structures, cultural values, and class positions are transmitted across generations. It also encompasses largely invisible and

uncompensated work including cooking, cleaning, family care, and homework, which are not just routine chores but essential economic processes that sustain capitalism and patriarchy (Bhattacharya 2017). A *gendered geography* lens reveals how daily activities sustaining life and labour are mapped unequally across spaces and scales (Katz 2019; Kofman and Raghuram 2015; Winders and Smith 2019). By highlighting this crucial dimension of care labour, a social reproduction lens enables us to investigate the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic reorganised life and work spatially and temporally. First, lockdown regimes expanded and reshuffled unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Second, public health mandates exposed essential and remote workers to elevated health risks, effectively blurring the lines between professional and private life (Stevano et al. 2021). The lockdowns also extended the crises of social reproduction to relatively privileged middle-class households. As highlighted by feminist research, this convergence exacted a disproportionate toll on women, who were forced to simultaneously navigate remote professional demands and amplified home responsibilities (Bender et al. 2022). In the transnational context, women deployed multiple forms of reproductive labour to fulfil competing care responsibilities.

Bourdieu's frameworks of habitus and capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic) are fruitful for examining how highly skilled migrants navigated the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Habitus entails one's ways of thinking and acting, shaped by one's social environment; economic capital refers to material wealth and liquidity; social capital comprises the networks and ties that provide vital support; and cultural capital encompasses the credentials, prestige, and skills that enable social mobility and shifts in hierarchical position (Bourdieu 1986). Crucially, for migration and migrants, citizenship, whether formal (legal and institutional) or informal (cultural, identity, belonging), represents a form of capital (Bauder 2008). Furthermore, transnational spaces can foster unique forms of transnational capital. Collectively, these transferable and interconvertible assets enable elite migrants to reproduce generational privilege and advantages across borders (Erel 2010). Highly skilled migrants can strategically convert their cultural capital (degrees, skills) into economic survival or spatial flexibility, such as possessing the digital capital to work safely from home (Wang et al. 2025). Similarly, far-reaching family networks function as essential social capital in this setting. Conversely,

administrative interruptions can prevent migrants from fully leveraging their institutional resources, such as citizenship and resident status, leading to variation in migrant mobility patterns (Jolivet et al. 2023).

Feminist scholars have expanded on Bourdieu's delineation of capital to include other capital, like feminine and emotional capital, to understand the classed experiences of women. These studies explored how women were not merely passive channels for resources, but also independent creators and managers of capital (Huppatz 2009; Reay 2004; Silva 2005). As such, feminist revisions of Bourdieu's categories of capital types and asset convertibility offer vital insights for analysing how migrant women exercise autonomy, make choices, and actively shape their circumstances.

Skilled Ghanaian Migration in Transnational Context

Following its independence, Ghana originally served as a primary destination for West African labour migrants, bolstered by an expanding economy and Pan-Africanist political stances (Akyeampong 2000). However, severe economic crises and political instability from the late 1960s through the 1980s reversed this trend, cementing Ghana's status as a country of net emigration (Peil 1995; Awumbila et al. 2008). Migrating abroad is now deeply ingrained in Ghanaian society, where cultural ideals frame mobility as a crucial step toward socioeconomic success. Rooted in this cultural expectation, the number of outward migrants surpassed a million by 2020 (Twum and Weinreich 2025). A significant portion (46%) live across the West African sub-region, with Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire serving as the primary destinations (Ghana Statistical Service 2023). Global economic shifts and changing labour markets have significantly diversified the geographical destinations for Ghanaian migrants beyond the West African region to the Global North (Arthur 2008; Bakuri 2018; Garba 2017; Mazzucato 2008). The Middle East has rapidly emerged as a critical corridor for domestic and service sector labour (Apekey et al. 2018; Kandilige et al. 2023), while Asia, especially China, has become a pivotal hub for transnational commerce and migration (Kandilige et al. 2024). This movement built a robust diaspora network and fostered active financial, social, and emotional transnational ties. Subsequently, diaspora remittances, amounting to almost US$8 billion in 2025,[1] have evolved into a significant

driver of Ghana's economic development, providing direct financial support that sustains households and families (Yeboah et al. 2021).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 severely disrupted the local and transnational practices of Ghanaian migrants. Sudden lockdowns and border closures halted circular cross-border mobility and trade, leaving thousands of Ghanaian migrants stranded and compelling them to devise innovative work, travel, digital, and care practices (Afrifa 2024). Research situated within the Ghanaian context offers limited insight into transnational female migration in general (Apatinga et al. 2022; Orkoh 2025). This gap is even wider for highly educated or professional women, whose specific migratory experiences remain vastly underrepresented in existing scholarship (Asiedu 2010). This study expands research on Ghanaian transnational families by analysing how elite and highly skilled women managed the compounding impacts of COVID-19.

Research Methods and Participants

This paper forms part of a larger, multi-sited investigation examining the global mobility of elite, highly skilled Ghanaian professionals. It draws on a qualitative, multi-method design exploring the lived experiences and coping strategies of those navigating international borders and pandemic lockdowns. Crucially, feminist epistemology underscores the value of lived experiences and everyday perspectives in revealing how gendered power dynamics are experienced physically, as well as how individuals actively resist or adapt to these constraints. This paper centres women's voices and lived experiences as they processed and navigated the pandemic emotionally and practically across domestic, transnational, and digital spaces.

First, in 2020, while stranded in Ghana, I conducted informal ethnographic interviews and participant observation within my local and diasporic networks. Second, I expanded the data using semi-structured, in-person and Zoom interviews, with participants recruited through a purposive sampling method, creating a cross-border dialogue that mirrored participants' mobile lives. Finally, I incorporated autoethnography to document my own experiences of navigating pandemic-era travel limits. This approach allowed me to integrate personal encounters and rigorous, systematic analysis to reflect

on the paper's broader themes. As a Ghanaian academic and naturalised United States (US) citizen, I benefitted from distinct privileges in job security, mobility, and access, which enabled me to navigate the complex pandemic-era biopolitical restrictions and international travel with relative ease. My positionality allowed me to move more fluidly between insider and outsider roles, fostering deeper trust with participants who saw me as sharing aspects of their diasporic and mobility challenges during the pandemic.

Characterised by privileged backgrounds and elite credentials, participants frequently leverage multiple resources including social, human, cultural and citizenship capital to navigate global markets and mobility. While the majority reside in primary diaspora centres, namely the United Kingdom (UK), US, Canada, and the European Union, a significant portion maintain active economic ties and entrepreneurial ventures in Ghana. Professionally, the participants represent a broad spectrum of specialised sectors, including finance, healthcare, law, academia, engineering, and the creative industries. These globally mobile individuals have the skills and resources to thrive across borders. Nonetheless, I show that during global crises, their transnational lifestyles reveal a complex mix of both privilege and vulnerability.

Findings and Analysis

To substantiate the forthcoming analysis, I feature extended excerpts from interviews with four women; one in Canada, two in the US and one in the UK. This analysis examines how cultural values, social and transnational networks, and class uniquely influenced how the women balanced work and caregiving during the pandemic. Despite experiencing the same pandemic-related disruptions, the four women relied on differing coping mechanisms driven by specific contexts and available resources. Instead of isolated experiences, these strategies reflect the broader patterns of the larger cohort. Collectively, they expose the inherent contradictions of class privilege, which simultaneously provided resources yet failed to fully buffer families against pandemic disruptions.

"Circulating Care": Navigating career transition and multiple obligations

Fosua is a finance professional in Canada, a mother of two young children and married to an academic. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, she shouldered the added financial strain of supporting her family in Ghana—all while navigating maternity leave and re-training to switch careers.

> When COVID hit us, I was on maternity leave, and I had wanted to use that. I took a year, because in Canada, you can take a year or 18 months. I was hoping I could move to Ghana to at least spend that leave at home, but then the way that news would happen, and these cases, it was always scary. […] And I didn't want to go back to the healthcare sector. I wanted to switch careers to the financial industry, and so I had to pay to get those certifications... So, I had to spend money on educating myself, upgrading myself, and, at first, the employment that I was doing, it was more of self-employment... It was a contract I had with my company. So, when I was self-employed in that sense, what I was getting as a salary was more of commission. […].
>
> I had paid to secure a spot at her day care. I just forfeited the money. I took them out… I wanted them to be with me at home… So, working from home in that sense with the kids alongside taking care of my career development was a bit challenging. […] I had to double as a mother, teacher, and worker at the same time. […] I went to stores, got the syllabus in there, got my study materials… wherever I could get study materials or reading materials, just so that my kids could still be educated.
>
> And, of course, also take care of the home because over here it's not like you have a family member who would come and stay with you because you have a newborn. No, you do everything yourself. […] It felt risky to even look for a babysitter because how would you know you're not introducing viruses to your newborn? […] I think COVID made me do a lot, but I also discovered my strengths. My husband is very supportive, don't get me wrong... but I think mine was a bit more.
>
> We keep joint accounts, and we also have our own accounts. If he has to send money to his family, he lets me know, agree on the amount. OK, I also have to send money home. I let him know we agree on the amount. […] And my sister also, she had just finished her national service, and she was trying to get a job, and she wasn't retained... She wanted to start her own business, which I agreed

> with. So, I sent her some money to support her […] So definitely, COVID made the demands a little bit more, and I could understand.
>
> In our Akan dialect, we have a proverb that says, 'Obi hwɛ wo ma wo se fifi a, wo nso wohwɛ no ma ne se tutu.' In other words, if someone took care of you for you to grow teeth, in their old age that their teeth are falling off, you also have to see to them too. You still have a responsibility to take care of your family. […] Of course, my dad does get pension from his banking job. I try to always send him something small to just support him, maybe his birthday, maybe Christmas […] I just connected with family on WhatsApp, video calls, Zoom calls. And that made me really homesick. It was a bit challenging because no matter how much you do with video, it was really hard because my dad is old, he's 82. And another thing is that my dad cannot hear very well. So, when I call him, I have to shout because he doesn't like wearing his hearing aid in the house.

Fosua's experience reveals how migrant women, irrespective of class background and despite spousal support, shoulder a disproportionate share of domestic labour and emotional care, while simultaneously balancing wage labour and transnational caregiving responsibilities. She reproduces middle-class educational aspirations at home, taking on homeschooling to secure her children's academic foundation, and exhibits a resilient, middle-class immigrant habitus of self-reliance to manage the crisis, optimisation, and determination to "up-skill." Though the certifications represent institutionalised cultural capital by validating her competency in a new field, her economic status is highly unstable during this transition, as she worked on a low-paying commission basis.

Fosua's transnational relationships demonstrate that migration is not simply individual economic advancement but a complex negotiation of social reproduction, constrained mobility, and gendered class positions. Her determination to advance professionally and support her parents is deeply rooted in Akan cultural values and expectations of what constitutes "good mothering" (Clark 1999); providing for dependents is a societal expectation carrying both moral fulfillment and prestige, reflecting a duty to family and community (Darkwah 2007). Not content to depend on her husband's income, Fosua capitalised on Canada's parental leave and the lockdown to pursue certifications that fuelled her career transition, taking contingent work while maintaining childcare. She sacrifices economic security and takes on immense physical labour to preserve her family's health and her own career

advancement. There is a sharp contradiction between her striving middle-class professional habitus and traditional gender expectations across both local and transnational spaces. She navigated structural isolation and economic instability while being expected to serve as an economic anchor for her relatives in Ghana. Nevertheless, she organised her transnational financial obligations across spatial boundaries. Maintaining separate bank accounts (individual and joint with husband) in Canada reflects the salience of matrilineal kinship for women's autonomy and empowerment in decision-making and strategies of support (Manuh 2001). Her social capital allows her to support her sister's business aspirations and assist her elderly father. Finally, her remark about discovering her strengths exemplifies how systemic societal pressures on working mothers during the pandemic were often reframed as individual resilience.

"Circulating Care": Navigating childcare under lockdown in the diaspora

Aisha is a Ghanaian physician with her own practice in the US and a mother of two. She is part of a dual-physician household, a marker of high institutionalised cultural capital, with siblings in the UK. Despite facing the immense demands of a dual-physician household and sudden travel bans, Aisha leveraged her transnational and local resources to restructure her childcare support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

> My husband and I were going about every one to two years, but starting in 2016, we started being more intentional about going every year… wanting my children to stay connected with Ghana and with their only one set of grandparents left. […] One thing that was nice is having avenues like, WhatsApp… staying in touch with people that way, but you still lose that physical connection, the seeing people, touching people, all of that.
>
> We had an amazing nanny, because with both of our professions, we have to—we don't have direct family here. The family and friends or friends we consider family, also have their own lives, so you can't always rely on them as much as they want to […]. We always knew that it was temporary, because she either wanted to go to school or find an actual career. It was November of 2019 she mentioned to us that she had gotten an opportunity to work.

> My siblings live in England. My niece had just finished her year abroad in her college, and she was waiting to go into her law programme... She wasn't starting until August of 2020. She had a good break from January to August. We talked it over, and we decided she would come and stay with us for a bit. It would be a break for her. She would hang out with her cousins, and it would give me time to be able to find somebody permanent. So, she arrived in January of 2020, and then the pandemic hit about six weeks later.
>
> It was a miracle, I tell you! I have to just talk about my niece here, because there's no way I could have managed without my niece! It was such a blessing for us. She was able to be home with the children. And my kids absolutely adore her… they just bonded. So, it was a relief for me. It was one less thing for me to worry about going to work… how they were going to keep up with their schoolwork? Who was going to be home with them? She was just here with them the entire time. I do not know how I could have managed all the stresses of work with having to worry about taking care of them as well.
>
> Given that my husband and I both did elementary and secondary school in Ghana, we still have Ghanaian mentality. My children are the kind that come home, and we have extra math books for them. My husband is the math one. I'm the reader. […] She was able to not just be tech savvy to get them logged into their school lessons, so they did not lose any traction with their school lessons. I think the disconnect with being with other friends was there a little bit, but she filled that void. Number two, she completely understood our need for them to continue to stay active. So, even if the homework wasn't as much, because the schools tried not to put too much on the students, she knew that we needed them to do extra reading and extra math, so they kept up with that.
>
> Our routine was my husband and I, when we came home, our children knew not to touch us. It was a whole thing. They would stand about a foot or so away and air hug us. And because we would have to strip down and take a hot shower before we touched them. […] For them, not having my niece here who could roll on the floor with them, play with them whenever they wanted to, I think it would have taken a lot from them, because we're [a] very touchy-feely family.

Aisha organised her family life around regular cross-border mobility to Ghana and the UK, which is a key practice of transnational social reproduction, sustaining kin ties and cultural belonging. The pandemic's forced immobility disrupted these circuits, and though social reproduction was rescaled into digital space, it did not substitute for embodied contact. As a dual-earning family, Aisha had the financial capacity to outsource domestic child rearing by

hiring a full-time nanny for their children. She arranged for her UK-based niece to stay with them, providing childcare support that became critical when the pandemic hit, illustrating the family's financial capacity to sustain her. Though a transnational move, this signifies common practices of kin circulating within Ghanaian households to assist with specific needs, such as childcare (Clark 1999). Her niece, who is highly educated and possesses digital literacy, was perfectly equipped to manage the children's educational, social, and emotional needs. Aisha and her husband rearranged their home to create a post-work decontamination zone and daily post-work clean-up routine. This process prevented them from embracing the children immediately, depriving them of essential immediate physical affection and creating an emotional and affective deficit, a void that was filled by her niece providing critical "emotional capital" for Aisha's children (Reay 2004). Her niece's inward mobility let Aisha's household stay relatively immobile, minimising exposure while sustaining the daily labour of social reproduction during intense professional strain as an essential worker. As Silva (2005) suggests, cultural capital must be understood as a relational asset rather than an individual commodity. Through the strategic deployment of cultural capital, linked to a rigorous educational work ethic, specialised knowledge, and transnational resources, middle-class mothers such as Aisha and Fosua actively foster their children's academic trajectory. This systematic transmission of educational and socioeconomic privilege illustrates the empirical mechanisms driving class reproduction.

"Circulating Care": Reorganising cross-border kin mobility

Effie, a physician, and her two siblings, one in healthcare and one in property management, live in the US representing forms of institutionalised cultural capital and an extension of parental cultural capital. Her family operates transnationally, with their emotional bonds and caregiving responsibilities spanning between Ghana and various locations across the US. Effie discusses how COVID reworked their lives, relationships, care work, and mobility.

> Before COVID, I probably went to Ghana probably every other year, and it was because my mother wasn't travelling a lot during that time. It's strange, she travels more now than she did then. […] Since COVID, my parents have actually spent more time in the US. So, we go to Ghana less. […] My siblings are on the East

Coast… like 2020, 2021 definitely changed how much we travel. We don't travel as much as we used to; it hasn't gone back to normal.

My dad was the one who was here [US] … my sister works in a hospital, so she was going to work. She was not working from home or an office [like me], right? She had a system that she had set up even before, but now she intensified it. She had a station when you walked into the house to take your shoes off, to clean your hands. She would take off her stuff at the door, put them in a bag, and wash her work clothes separately from the other clothes. She wore gloves. She was very conscientious about not bringing it home. Actually, my dad didn't [get] COVID, at least not until much later, right? After the vaccine is when he got it. My mom was in Ghana, right? She had household help. She's pretty strong and resilient; she was also being very careful. My mom is fastidious, so during COVID times, she made sure that they were masking. When they went to the markets, their masks were on. So, she didn't get COVID. She came to the US … this is where she got COVID.

He didn't leave until April or so of [20]21, and then my mom came either later in [20]21 or early of [20]22. So, she comes and she goes to the East Coast, and then she comes here for a while. And then she goes back east, and then she leaves. So, most of the time she stays in the US for five to six months. […] My parents now spend a lot of time in the US, well, because "you guys are here!" I want to go home in February, right? And everyone's like, why are you going home? Because they're here.

I think that if I hadn't been ill, COVID would have hit me differently… because I was just coming out of that when COVID happened. But how have things changed? I think that just the awareness, because I'm in the health sector, the awareness that stuff could happen really fast, and things can really change again. And, also, being careful about travel. I mean, I still travel […] It made me think about these things and what I'm doing with my life, right? […] I tend to just kind of coast, and [now] I like being more intentional about what I'm doing. The thing that came for me out of that whole experience, being ill and COVID, is that I'm not afraid to die. I'm afraid that I have not lived enough, right? And so, making sure that I'm having the experiences I want to have while I still have the energy and the time. […] Like going to this festival. The festival we [siblings] were going to was cancelled the week before, but we decided, it's good to be in each other's company, so we'll just go and hang out together.

During the pandemic, these circuits of transnational family were re-routed but not broken. Much like Aisha, Effie's sibling, who worked on the frontlines, owned a house to care for their father during the pandemic, where they followed strict health protocols. This exemplifies the pandemic-era configuration of social reproduction, in which the boundary between a healthcare worker's professional obligations and domestic caregiving collapses, with her daily sanitisation rituals safeguarding their father's health. Through pooled financial remittances, the family subsidised domestic care for their mother in Ghana, illustrating how reproductive labour associated with the maintenance of the households and risk-mitigating health regimes was structured through transnational paid labour (Coe 2017).

Following her own health struggles and the onset of the pandemic, Effie realised the importance of living with intention. She and her siblings organised regular gatherings to strengthen their bonds and make the most of their time; their mobility is less frequent but more intentional. As a physician, class here manifests as job security and continued income, positioning her to convert mobility into quality time and self-realisation. The pandemic also redefined her family's transnational mobility; both of her parents now spend extended time in the US visiting children across multiple states, reducing the need for routine travel to Ghana. Ghana becomes less a site of regular, obligatory return and more a symbolic homeland, as the US East Coast emerges as the central anchor for the family. Taken together, these activities signal a relatively privileged, professional Ghanaian family with access to resources, legal status (both parents have permanent residence status in the US) and institutional connections that allow routinised transnational movement. This legal status acts as a concrete form of institutionalised cultural capital, whereby state-issued credentials confer advantages of unrestricted global mobility. Effie and her siblings can financially afford to host and care for their parents, reshaping their parents' mobility patterns, characterised by continuous rotation through the households of their successful children. Their mobility is driven by choice and lifestyle, representing a mode of transnational living that few migrants achieve.

"Circulating Care": Navigating transnational kin care and mobility

Ofeibea, a UK-based legal civil servant, and her finance husband enjoy a professional dual-income lifestyle with family roots extending across the UK and Ghana. She had booked her tickets to visit Ghana in 2020 when the pandemic broke out and lockdown was set in place, interrupting their annual family visits.

> We had been in Ghana, where circumstances... My husband was a senior executive where he works, so we had quite a lot of disposable income, lots of helpers, we had a driver, we had two maids.
>
> I was working from home then [when COVID hit], but I was used to the whole family being out all day, children went to school and husband went to work. Now all of a sudden, everybody was at home all day […] The house was big enough so that everybody could be in a separate corner […] It wasn't until much later that I reflected that actually that was quite destabilising for me, because I was really used to having these six hours to myself, was quiet, I had my own thoughts […] I now realised, oh, this was actually a thing for me, especially now that my husband changed jobs in, in the … that two years, so now his role is remote, he works from home all the time, so I never did go back to being… so my new normal is that I will not have six hours to myself again. […] Looking back, this is all a lot of reflection, my mental health was suffering; I was not happy.
>
> From the homeschooling perspective, it was terrible... I gave it up. I was just like, my children's education would suffer because of the lockdown, because I cannot teach them. I cannot do what teachers do. This is why I send my children to school.
>
> I had never been away from my parents for more than two years... I hadn't seen my parents for two years, that was a bit difficult for me […] My parents have never been financially dependent on me in any way. They've never given me the idea that they needed financial support... Everybody's looking after themselves. […] And then, because of my father's illness, which had started becoming evident in July 2021, we came back in August, and by November, I went back just to see him. Whatever COVID measures were there were observed. I came back before Christmas. COVID measures were observed.
>
> I went for their anniversary, and he was not well. I spoke to his doctors when I was leaving at the end of August. I was not too happy with what I was seeing. So, I stayed in touch just to keep up with his health, and he deteriorated very fast.

> My brother moved to the UK at that time as well. The reports he brought, I didn't like them. I wanted to be there myself. When I went, I realised that my mother was doing the bulk of the care work by herself. She's, she's too old, trying to lift him. So, I organised nursing care for him. I hadn't gone with the idea that I was going to go do care work, but I was going to see, which I was then able to sort of help coordinate from the distance when I came back during Christmas and the New Year. He was finally hospitalised in early 2022 and never came out of the hospital.
>
> In fact, that year… 2021–2022, I went to Ghana four times. And I was away for long stretches at the time. Yeah, it could not have happened if I hadn't had the year before with my children at home and my husband learning the household routines, learning to do laundry right, learning to prepare, get some basic food preparation, getting a routine, just understanding how the house worked. If we hadn't had that year, there was no way I could have spent that following year going to Ghana four times up and down, with all the disruption that came with family as well. But they cooked, they did very well. I would cook, I'd leave things in the freezer, they would just warm things up, cook the rice, and all of that […]. It [COVID] gave us a chance to bond as a family again in a way that we had not for more than five years... The children learnt to do more in the house to help me […] It's not about the resources you have. It's about reorganising your life, which can be very, very difficult and challenging.

Ofeibea's account underscores the profound difficulty of balancing professional obligations with multiple caregiving duties, emphasising the deep emotional weight of these competing demands. In migrating to the UK, prior to the pandemic, Ofeibea and her nuclear family experienced relative class descent, losing the domestic privileges they previously enjoyed in Ghana and leaving her to absorb that labour. Pandemic restrictions produced vulnerability and isolation through prolonged spatial separation yet simultaneously enabled Ofeibea to reorganise domestic and caregiving duties locally and transnationally. Mobility/immobility during the COVID era operated as both opportunity and constraint for migrants. Strict lockdowns disrupted international visits, constraining her desire to visit her parents and causing emotional strain. For example, her husband's job changed to remote work, further impacting on her need for personal space and quiet time. At the same time, lockdown forced her nuclear family in the UK to become more self-reliant, empowering her husband and children to develop practical skills and to take on greater household duties, which gave her the freedom to make four

extended trips to Ghana in 2021–2022. Pandemic constraints paradoxically built capacity for transnational care provision, contingent on reconstructing gender relations at home. Managing household and work responsibilities during a crisis relied on having adequate resources: a large home, digital connectivity, and socioeconomic support. Ample space prevented overcrowding, reflecting how structural privilege and domestic environment shaped pandemic coping. In her case, though, she prioritised her capacity limits over children's educational optimisation, disrupting the cultural norms of intensive parenting and the "ideal mother" ideology that was pervasive during the lockdown (Cummins and Brannon 2022). Conversely, her ability to work remotely provided flexibility unavailable to working-class women in rigid employment enabling her transnational care trips. Yet this class privilege came with precarity; client work was delayed, creating backlogs during transnational caregiving.

Her journey through the pandemic illustrates a model of transnational caregiving where care is defined by physical presence rather than just financial support. She navigated cross-border healthcare systems, coordinating professional care remotely from the UK. Her frequent, urgent trips allowed her to provide hands-on support to her mother, and to manage her father's illness, hospitalisation, and subsequent funeral. Her ability to afford costly, complex travel (immunisations, testing, and quarantines) underscores a class-based mobility privilege many in the diaspora lack, unable to fund repeated trips or navigate shifting protocols. Her father's care regime shows how class enables access to paid care; while this did not remove her burden, it shifted her role to care manager, coordinating Ghanaian services remotely, providing emotional labour, and intervening during critical moments. Ultimately, transnational care remains gendered despite class resources; Ofeibea, not her brother or male relatives in the UK, organised her father's care, reinforcing cultural expectations that daughters, even those living abroad, assume the responsibilities for managing elder care (Asenso-Agyemang 2023; Coe 2017), illuminating the concept of "gender capital." Even though Ofeibea's parents were fully independent and financially secure, liberating her from remittance obligations, simultaneously managing her household and transnational elder care duties placed a profound emotional burden on her.

Concluding Discussion

Adopting an intersectional lens, I explored how the different circumstances and backgrounds of Ghanaian migrant women shaped the coping mechanisms they adopted to fulfil both their professional and familial roles amid the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic served as a catalyst for reworking how mobility, work, and family life were organised and how class dynamics shaped their strategies in particular ways. Class advantages—financial privileges and professional flexibility—let families adapt to remote and hybrid work, but did not insulate them from the pandemic's disruptions, which forced a wholesale reorganisation of daily life and household routine. Their narratives align with research demonstrating how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted and reconfigured their everyday lives and cross-border movements of transnational migrants in different ways (Asenso-Agyemang 2023; Afrifa 2024).

The analysis highlights important contributions. First, this study underlined the deeply gendered nature of managing work and care. Women continuously balanced professional demands against a complex web of locations, bureaucracies, and family obligations, underscoring a persistent asymmetry in care work. The analysis extends the literature by showcasing that gender norms similarly constrain skilled and working-class women. Their class status enabled families to outsource care but did not exempt them from caregiving responsibilities. Gendered care obligations persisted for all the women in different ways. For women with young children, the pandemic appears to have reinforced conventional gender norms, with limited options for childcare. However, women deployed various resources to navigate loss of childcare options and elder care provision. The shift to more remote flexible work arrangement allowed some husbands to increase their share of social reproductive work, mitigating the burden of care on their wives, showcasing a more equitable distribution of reproductive work within relatively privileged households.

Second, the analysis spotlighted the creative and resourceful strategies women employed to reorganise household routines and balance competing caregiving demands. The pandemic ignited other shifts: strengthening nuclear family bonds, developing household competencies, transitioning careers, and deepening extended family connections. Embedded within "geographies of

privilege," where gender, class, migration, and citizenship status intersect, these women were able to buffer their families against the pandemic's disruptive realities. Unequal access to varied resources dictated the women's abilities to negotiate disruptions, carry out obligations, and navigate travel restrictions. But privilege has its limits; it merely mitigates rather than eliminates vulnerability. Under pandemic conditions, even relatively privileged middle-class women encountered rigid structural boundaries that constrained their agency and capacity to move.

Third, the study illustrated how some women navigated the pandemic's travel limitations to practise active transnationalism, maintaining continuous cross-border exchanges of financial, social, and cultural resources in multiple directions (Baldassar et al. 2024). These everyday actions reveal deep, global interdependencies, a concept central to "global householding" (Douglas 2006). Transnational networks served as vital conduits, granting some women access to informal caregiving solutions or formal care provisions. For many skilled Ghanaian migrants, the periodic physical visitation model was replaced by digital co-presence and a reliance on the circulation of emotional support over digital infrastructure, including phone calls, Zoom, and WhatsApp, to maintain care relationships and to reconfigure family dynamics in transnational contexts. Maintaining a physical presence and delivering in-person care across the diaspora necessitated negotiations with family on both sides, as they navigated complex travel restrictions. Actively leveraging multi-local family ties to reconfigure geographies of mobility shifted the centre of family life and care to the diaspora for some women. Mobility is, therefore, unevenly distributed and fundamentally shaped by entrenched social hierarchies, such as class, gender, and migration patterns, with citizenship and legal immigration status as critical drivers of movement. Rather than focusing on semi or unskilled African migrants, this study centres an understudied group of highly skilled professional women balancing the intersecting pressures of work and caregiving. The paper contributes to theorising how women strategically deploy capital in its multiple forms and convertibility. The women actively mobilised distinct social, digital, professional, and legal capital to navigate the pandemic and the challenges of maintaining family relationships across borders. While the pandemic era has largely concluded, its enduring effects are still unfolding, most notably in the ongoing transformation of domestic spaces.

This study suggests that future transnational family research requires intersectional frameworks to analyse work-care dynamics across diverse spatial-temporal contexts.

Notes:

1. https://businessfront.com/finance/news/ghana-foreign-remittances-2025/

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Possibilities of a Feminist Migration Future

Mary Setrana, Franzisca Zanker and Lena Diakite

In this piece, we question whether the implementation of a feminist migration agenda in the political arena is at all possible. Although political inclusion and gender awareness in policymaking, including migration policy, can be counted as successes of feminist organising, this inclusion has largely been formulated and implemented superficially.

Increasing numbers of African governments are developing migration policies that, to some extent, address particular issues of gender. All 55 African Union member states have ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, which entered into force on 25 November 2005. When it comes to migration, the African Union's 2024 Migration Policy Framework for Africa evaluation report indicates that 33 member states reported implementing national migration policies in line with the goals set out in the 2018 policy document, which is designed to improve migration across the continent. Out of these, however, only six have intentionally integrated gender perspectives in national and regional migration management policies, strategies, and programmes. Ghana, Nigeria, Lesotho, Malawi, Morocco, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, South Africa, and Zambia, among others, have included gender as a cross-cutting issue.

Such policies are unlikely to have a transformative or wide-reaching effect, as demonstrated in an interview with an expert from one of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) member states.

> You see, the men should not gather to make policies and suddenly realise that there is a need for a woman, so they try to invite a few women to "add" and "stir" to address the gender problems. No, this is not what we want. We want to have a voice; we want to equally be represented to make suggestions as to what works best in the interest of both women and men.

In the process of depoliticising feminism, there has been a watering down of the social justice thoughts behind the broader feminist agenda (Ahikire 2014). International organisations, for example, differ in how they seek to respond to the "feminisation of migration," from simply adopting a more gendered discourse to the promotion of more critical rights-centred alternatives to current migration practices (Mahon 2021). These varied responses underscore the importance of gender in migration debates, yet they also point to the need for more transformative visions.

If we took a feminist agenda seriously, migration could look very different. The very experience of migration can lead to changing gender norms and the questioning of (constructed) patriarchal structures (see also Madambi 2020). At its most basic, the return of migrant women can change the socioeconomic development of specific regions, as shown by Walter Nkwi in his historical account of migrant women returning to the Bamenda Grassfields in Cameroon (Nkwi 2018). Beyond that, sometimes migratory strategies can also lead to the renegotiation of traditional and patriarchal practices, as Pragna Rugunanan shows for Indian migrant women who follow their spouses to a foreign country—in this case, South Africa (Rugunanan 2020). Recent Ghanaian court judgments also show how gender norms have shifted due to migration:

> In this [international migration] paradigm shift, the relationship between husband and wife is less one of hierarchical dependency and more of equal partnership (Mensa-Bonsu, JSC, Supreme Court Judgment of Ghana, Civil Appeal No. J4/22/2020, 2).

Beyond the individual level, broader changes are not visible. Symbolic gestures of "gender inclusion" within a neoliberal system will not and have not delivered freedom or gender justice (Tamale 2020, 6). In contrast, Lynn Ossome argues that women's rights are more or less completely negated by the economic scarcity and dispossession produced in the neoliberal world order (Ossome 2015). This is, of course, an intersectional issue and does not have the same effect on migrant women working in well-paid, so-called "highly skilled" jobs compared to, for example, precarious domestic workers. But the reality is most migrant women are likely to be working under precarious working conditions. Moreover, migrant women are well regarded because of their reproductive roles; however, power and influence over migration decision-making and

policymaking do not lie within their domain. Indeed, according to Nothando Maphalala, "African feminists have always stressed that 'smashing the patriarchy' is only half the battle, with imperialism and capitalism being the other half" (Maphalala 2021; see also Barry 2023). Given the artificial nature of gender-aware policymaking and the pervasiveness of interlocking oppressive structures, is a feminist migration agenda even possible? How can the feminisation of migration move beyond the numbers of independently migrating women to affect the very way migration is imagined? What would this look like?

We see three avenues towards a feminist migration future:

Changes to migration policies

A core tenet of the feminist migration agenda is to change the conventionally discriminatory status quo. If we turn to African feminist scholarship, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's critique of mainstream western feminism, which ties women to the nuclear family, may explain the absence and silencing of women in much of migration policymaking. According to this logic, a woman does not transcend the private sphere of her subordination (Oyěwùmí 2002). Yet, the private is political, and, of course, women are very much part of the public sphere and affected by migration policies (for a critique of the division between the public and private realm, see Beoku-Betts and Adomako Ampofo 2021). In the face of structural inequalities and problematic migration policies that worsen the current precarious situation, the only choice for women migrants may be to try and practically avoid public spaces (McDowell and Wonders 2009). When avoidance is no longer possible, the structures and policies that force them out of society need to change. Changes to the status quo can come about through policy changes at the household, local, institutional, and national levels. These policy changes start with initiatives such as anti-corruption measures at especially high-traffic borders, gender-based violence training for border patrol officers, and increased numbers of female border patrol officers in immigration and customs enforcement institutions. Another example could be safe houses for migrant women. Finally, along with the inclusion of gender-specific experts in migration policymaking, women should be included in all policymaking with a real voice. Yet, this alone is not enough.

Towards an ethics of care

Fundamental to a feminist migration future is a reconceptualisation of the migrant category: instead of being stopped, securitised or negatively seen, migrants and the concept of migration should rather be seen as something shrouded in an ethics of care for all migrants. According to Victoria Held, care is both a practice and a value that is "trust and mutual concern and connectedness between persons" (quoted in Krystalli and Schulz 2022). Care ethics, therefore, look to take this definition of care and apply it to a larger framework of modality. In the context of migration, an ethics of care exists as an alternative to liberal individualism. As a framework, feminist care ethics sees "people as relational, connected, interdependent, and inherently vulnerable, recognizing the moral value and importance of relations and the inescapable reality that care is universally required for all human beings to survive" (Krystalli and Schulz 2022). Embedded in the neoliberal capitalist world order that dictates who can move and when, migration policy extends the apathetic hand of the "free" market to yet another vulnerable group. Compounding this vulnerability is a patriarchal framework under which migration policy is created. Thus, taking an ethics of care seriously would see migration policy move beyond liberal agendas and reposition migration outside its current spectre of violence. Such violence includes postcolonial borders, the violent regimes of control that currently enforce them, and the broader mechanisms that serve to legitimise the exploitation and subordination of migrants. Women migrants especially suffer from the tyranny of border policy, as they are forced to exist at the intersection of two discriminated against social categories: as a woman and a migrant. This takes us to our final point.

Placing human beings before borders

A feminist migration future would move beyond the state. This is because of the active role that the state often takes in perpetuating and ignoring the many insecurities faced by migrants in their quest to enforce their sovereignty (Stasiulis et al. 2020). Lyn Ossome notes feminists need to step back from valuing the state to critically confront the limitations that it poses in the face of global hegemonic powers (Ossome 2015). Her case for a reconceptualised Pan-Africanism (in contrast to the state) addresses neoliberal labour conditions

and the lack of emancipation for women in informal sectors; much the same argument can be extended to migration. Ossome asks, "What would it mean to place human beings before profits?" In the context of feminist-informed migration practices, we can ask: "What would it mean to place human beings before borders and citizenship?"

In a feminist reimagining of borders and the powers that enforce them, restrictions such as fees and requirements for formal migration (mobility with specific documentation) would be abolished to make way for care-informed mobility (see also Arhin-Sam et al. 2022). With care ethics at the helm, a feminist migration agenda can reimagine the state of contemporary border regions. In a feminist reimagining of borders, migratory zones could allow for informal border crossings and prioritise the health and security of migrants while doing so. By abolishing borders and negating the coloniality of power (that is, the imposition of artificial borders for a start) on the African continent, a feminist migration agenda does not seek to simply dismantle contemporary power regimes without offering any replacement in their stead. Leaning on the teachings of Martina Tazzioli and carceral abolitionist feminists such as Angela Davis, a feminist migration agenda asks us to construct equitable institutions while pursuing the possibility of a feminist mobile future in a humane way (Tazzioli 2019). Understanding the potentials of that future is something that researchers need to address first, as discussed next.

Going Forward in the Status Quo

The vibrant discussion of African feminist scholars acknowledges the intersectional lived experience of women, including migrant women, that interacts with race and postcolonial economic subjugation. There is also a strong feminist perspective to activism and calls for transformation of the status quo. This highlights the active role of women migrants (a topic still rarely researched) and their potential to help carve out a more caring migration policy for the future.

The very first step in securing this future is transforming the focus and conduct of migration research. Since migration research is instrumental to policymaking and the transformation of policy and its production is the

ultimate goal, a change in research practice is necessary. Keeping to our ivory towers of theoretical feminist critique will not suffice.

Daiva Stasiulis et al. call for the redressing of the epistemological and social erasure of demonised migrant groups, who declare—and here they cite the poet June Jordan, "I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name. My name is my own, my own" (emphasis in original Stasiulis et al. 2020). For Christina Kazan-Clarke, radical care re-centres human relationships to engage with all the ethical challenges that migration (research) brings with it, including the criminalisation of migration, extreme power asymmetries, precarities in migration status, and the politicisation of migration policies (Clark-Kazak 2023). Thus, women migrants need to be included in research, understood in knowledge-making processes, and made socially visible. At the very centre, there needs to be a relational connection to those we engage with in our research. Moreover, for the African context in particular, Josephine Ahikire makes a case for re-politicising and reclaiming feminist thought and language, to access an "ideological force that poses fundamental challenges to patriarchal orthodoxies of all kinds" (2014, 9). These are all the first steps to take while more work is needed on how to address the complexity of the paradox of a feminist migration future.

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"She Cannot Sit Idle": Kinship, Class and Gendered Politics of Women's Mobility

Dorothy Takyiakwaa speaks with Madeleine Wong, an African woman migration scholar living and working in the United States (US). The conversation focuses on Madeleine's intellectual journey and her perspectives on the diverse migration experiences for different African women. It also reflects on Madeleine's social position and mobilities within the US academy and her connection to Ghana.

Dorothy Takyiakwaa (DT): Please tell us about yourself and how you came to migration studies?

Madeleine Wong (MW): My name is Madeleine Wong, and it is always interesting that I have to explain the Wong because when I write, I do so as a Ghanaian scholar. I am a Ghanaian of mixed heritage with a Ghanian mother and a Chinese father, so that is where Wong comes from. I was born and raised in Ghana. My mom is from Anum, and I speak Anum and Twi. I pride myself in knowing that I speak a language (Anum) that is spoken by a very small proportion of the population. It is very important to my identity. I went to primary and secondary school in Ghana before going to England to complete my A-Level education. I ended up at Mount Holyoke College in the US for my undergraduate studies, where I was originally on the pre-med track. However, I rediscovered my passion for geography and finished with a double major in biology and geography. I later got a master's and doctoral degrees in geography. I tried to stay true to my parents' expectation of health focus, so I chose human geography more generally and migration specifically. I took interest in health geography, combining my biology with geography. It is my experiences of being an education migrant and then encountering a Ghanaian community in Toronto, where I got my PhD, that crystallised my interests in and pursuit of migration studies specifically. Positionality is so important.

DT: What are the key areas that you think are important to focus on in migration studies?

MW: I was an active member of an immigrant church during my PhD in Toronto. I think being very present in the church, the women in the church and I got along; my interactions with them and hearing about their everyday lives and challenges revealed a gap in the migration literature, which did not reflect their experiences specifically, and African migrant women in general. That is how I came to the question of focusing my research on Ghanaian women migrants. Furthermore, the dominant trend in the literature focused often on women who might be considered as traditional migrants, who migrated to join their partners. What struck me from that first project was the importance of kinship—especially the matrilineal system. The experiences of those women were different from what is represented in the literature. I realised how significantly their identities were shaped by their matrilineal kinship system. There was the constant trope of sisters or nieces helping at home. My contribution to the literature highlighted how such kinship systems influence women's experience of migration, their decision-making, how they navigate the everyday life of a migrant and their transnational connections. These women came from different socioeconomic backgrounds—educated, uneducated, in various forms of employment. Some of their experiences were different from the privileged, comfortable life that I have had, and those were my blind spots. It was interesting to see the different strategies they used to capitalise on the Canadian context to make the most of it. Some women cooked at home and supplied local stores, in addition to doing other multiple jobs. That was my first understanding of women not having just one job. If you are going to succeed abroad, you have to do everything. The fact that they were not just submissive, staying at home doing nothing and depending on the man, gave invaluable insights into how kinship systems of descent and inheritance shaped their experiences and behaviours, which was largely invisible in the literature at the time.

DT: Tell me a bit about your mother and father's economic activities and in relation to their social classes.

MW: My mom stayed at home for most of my childhood. She would dabble in small entrepreneurship now and again. My father was a Chinese expat who worked as a manager for the Ghana Textile Manufacturing Company (GTMC) in Tema. We were members of a Chinese club in Tema, and so some of my early friends were Chinese. When GTMC collapsed at the beginning of the neoliberal turn in Ghana, he lost his job. With no other roots in Ghana and coupled with the anti-foreigner sentiments of the time, he left for Hong Kong. He came back after a few months to try to set up a business, but it did not work out, so he left Ghana the second time. At his second leaving, I was 16 years old and the next year I got a scholarship to study in England. So, for a period, I was in a transnational family arrangement. My father supported us from afar; he paid our school fees. My mother was a housewife. She was very savvy. As an expat, my dad was paying foreign fees. When he lost his job, she negotiated with the school so we would pay local Ghanaian fees—as children of a Ghanaian mother—and that is how my brother and I managed to finish. At this school, I was exposed to international scholarships, so I applied and received a scholarship, which allowed me to study at a private girls' boarding school in England for my A levels. From there, I applied to American colleges and ended up in America for my undergraduate studies. So, my life definitely embodies those class dimensions of access, especially access through private education.

DT: How do your upbringing and experiences and the research gaps you identified in the literature shape your research and dissemination strategies?

MW: I brought my observation of my extended family to my research. At some point, our two-bedroom flat had 14 or 15 people living there, including my grandmother, aunties, nephews, and nieces. After my PhD, my research focused on skilled migration. I saw that matrilineality and multiple strategies of survival in Canada addressed one gap in the literature, but it still reproduced the idea that those who migrate from Africa to Canada are working-class hustlers. However, many of my own classmates went to England and the US and others that I met were professionals. The literature did not talk about skilled migrants—especially skilled Africans beyond the brain drain focus. This made me focus on everyday experiences of skilled care workers

such as nurses. A family member who was a nurse in the UK made me see the connection with migration, skilled work, and healthcare. That formed the basis of my next project on nurses in England, due to their high numbers there, and asking questions on their recruitment, recertification, placement, and work experiences in the hospitals. Now, I am fully dedicated to research on highly educated professional workers, as there is less emphasis on them, because people think their experiences are not so dire. In Chimamanda Adichie's "The Danger of a Single Story," she shared that her professor could not imagine her writing a story about highly accomplished people in Africa. It is the same thing; the dominant perception is that Africans are poor and it is substantiated with images of Africans crossing the Mediterranean Sea and so on. People who are educated and skilled migrants also experience all kinds of challenges, but the way they navigate those challenges are different.

DT: Can you share with us some striking experiences of the women migrants you have studied and how those came across to you?

MW: Doing a deep dive in matrilineal kinship systems, I concluded that it empowers women in ways that a lot of people do not appreciate. Ghana is a patriarchal society just as most societies. My first sole-authored article I submitted was rejected by one of the top feminist journals at that time because the reviewers questioned the validity of my arguments. The reviewers' comments included: "Are women that empowered in the Ghanaian context? We don't find evidence of that." There is an expectation for women to be submissive to men in a heteropatriarchal society. Gender and sexuality are really important when you do feminist work and centre the experiences of women. You have to factor in the specificities of particular groups of women.

DT: What were some of the specific things that the reviewers thought were not true?

MW: This was in the early 2010s. I was arguing that, for example, in matrilineal societies, many couples do not keep joint financial accounts. The women and men kept separate accounts. Some of the women talked about how they use their income however they want, without consulting with the

husband. The couple sometimes agree to collectively pay the rent or mortgage but aside from that, each makes decisions regarding their own incomes. The reviewers questioned the freedom the women had to make decisions on how they spend their own income, including remitting their nieces, nephews, or sisters. To them, that was not the normative narrative in the literature. The critique was that these women were too powerful or empowered and thus do not fit the perception of African women who are *supposed* to be poor, submissive, dependent on their husbands. Many of the people interviewed knew this. Some said: "Ah, Madeleine, but you know how it is in Ghana." I say, I do. It was not enough knowing, but to also articulate it, to let others know that it exists too, and that it is important for us to understand how this relationship shapes how women see themselves.

DT: Considering that was the 2010s, there was early literature to support your argument. For example, the 1985 article by Agnes Aidoo titled "Women in the History and Culture of Ghana" focused on women's significant roles among the Akan, who are predominantly matrilineal.

MW: Yes! When you are stuck in a particular Western conceptual framework, you are not going to branch that far. It takes somebody who is local or comes from that cultural context. This is why positionality is important. It takes someone who is immersed in the local culture, who seeks to understand and takes the extra step to dig deeper. A ground-up qualitative methodology is needed. It is through conversations that these issues emerge and that we understand how important they are to women. Researchers continue to ignore the significance of matrilineal and patrilineal systems. I objected to a paper I reviewed because it diminished the differences in family systems of different groups (i.e., Ashanti and Ewe) and how that could impact decision-making. If you collapse all the women into one group and do not tease out the intersection of ethnicity and inheritance descent, you do not get a nuanced picture. Similarly, class comes into play in different ways. While some will privilege the nuclear family setup over the extended family because the former serves their interests, they are not dissociated from their heritage. They still play roles in their extended families, including supporting family members. It

never is out of the picture in explaining how they engage with families in terms of how they raise their families and those transnational linkages.

DT: This raises important questions about how intersectionality and feminist approaches could help in this work. How do these enrich your understanding of and approach to migration research?

MW: I was exposed to critical feminist scholarship during my doctoral studies, which helped me understand—at least from the western perspective, what feminist analysis allows us to do in terms of centring women, multiple voices, and experiences. I think that is really important. My first project was on women. But I got a sense that there was more to the women's stories. I knew there were gaps. When analysing the gender dynamics at play, you must understand the extent to which women's experiences, women's explanations, and strategies are not occurring in a vacuum. They are occurring in relation to other social and economic relationships and matrices of power within which they are embedded. Feminist analysis also allows us to understand how gendered dynamics of power shape women's experiences. For me, personally, there is not enough written about African women's migration experiences and the diversity of those experiences. The inherent assumption is a male migrant. We almost always have to qualify it by saying female migrant. For me, it is important to explain women's experiences through the migration process at all levels and how they are positioned in relation to power. I think their experiences are obviously shaped by their gender intersecting with other identity categories. Despite critiquing the dominant roles and responsibilities that define men and women's experiences, we cannot collapse and homogenise experiences. I am a geographer and a qualitative researcher, so place, specificity, and context matter. I have researched Ghanaians' migration to Canada, England, and the United States. Each of these migration streams produces different kinds of experiences. Not only from the perspective of Ghana or the migrant, but also the context of reception, whether it is urban, rural, north or south, or immigration policies, they all shape experiences in myriad ways. Feminist analysis allows us to expose the diversity, multiple voices, and epistemologies in understanding the complexities of the migration process.

DT: Would you then say that you are telling a fuller story by being intersectional and feminist in your analyses?

MW: It is revealing and adding to our understanding of all the many factors that shape migration. I know the push-pull, old neoclassical theories are still important to think about, but it is the nuances that are often more interesting. My first PhD supervisor decided not to supervise me because I chose to do qualitative research. She wanted me to do a quantitative survey, with the argument that I will not be competitive in the academy because people with quantitative skills are preferred. I said quantitative projects do not tell me much; I want more. I sought different advisers. Feminist epistemologies and methodologies allow us to research the nuances. Migration can be a traumatic experience for people, and it allows us to see the power dynamics at play and how they shape women's experiences, both in a positive and terrible and exploitative way. Awareness of those experiences that can inform policies, whether in the migrants' origin or destination areas. African women have always been very active in movements within the West African context; we partook in many migration movements, whether it is through religious networks or trading. We are actively engaged in this process.

DT: How does your research connect with the burgeoning corpus of literature on South-South migration, to China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), for example?

MW: The world is changing; there are opportunities emerging from so many parts of the world. For some time, certain parts of the world were closed but now, they are open. As other parts of the world have shut their doors or tightened their borders, others open, and humans will always move. China and the Middle East have expanded their net in recruiting various labour and expanding markets for entrepreneurs respectively. The globalisation of different kinds of work has enabled Africans to migrate to different parts of the world. Economic opportunities still dominate the motivations for migration. Restrictive policies are constricting movement for family reunification purposes. As capital searches for cheaper resources, those doors are opening for migrants from Africa. The context of reception is going to be

different. The very different policies and rules operating in the Middle East and China are going to allow for certain kinds of things but not others.

DT: So now, return migration. You mentioned at the beginning that you are navigating the return. What exactly is it about and how does it contribute to the global literature?

MW: In the early 2010s, I decided to come home as often as possible as my way of coping with the fact that I was struggling in the US. I used to save money throughout the year to buy my ticket home. One year, I got very sick while in the US. I came home, and by the time I got back to the US, I had stabilised and was back to normal. I feel that coming home is my medicine; it helps me deal with the racism and other challenges there. Now I come home every year, either in the summer or Christmas, never missing a year. My conversations with those who have returned to Ghana permanently or in phases challenges the unidirectional or linear view of migration. In today's world, many migrants circulate in or maintain strong transnational ties with multiple places, which compel us to rethink notions of identity, belonging, and attachment to place. Feminist analysis allows us to examine how migrants navigate the return and transnational experiences as gendered subjects—involving negotiations of norms and expectations at different scales, from the household to the extended family to transnational or local work opportunities.

DT: I can see, for example, how the family system, social class, and social mobility are connected to physical mobility. Class, support systems, and social networks influence the mobility decisions one can make.

MW: There is an Asante proverb or saying which translates as "a lazy woman is not a good mother." It is expected that a woman will work. When that feeds into their socialisation, the women then acquire that sense of assertiveness. She cannot sit idle and expect a man to take care of her. The traditional idea is that what the man owns is not hers but his family's. She cannot sit idle; she has to work. Ideas like this implicitly influence decision-making on migration. Extended family or friend relationships may facilitate mobility, including return and integration.

DT: So, what has been the nature of movement for African women?

MW: West African women have always been on the move for various reasons. We have a history of movement and an expectation that women work. These drive the bold decision women make to migrate to different parts of the world, whether to advanced, industrialised societies or to China now. I think China and Dubai now are expansions of trading networks. It is not necessarily new but manifests differently. Before China, people were going to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore; they were already going that far to get goods for the Ghana markets. The movements shift based on where opportunities arise.

DT: What other reasons for migration are there, apart from the economic drivers? How about leisure?

MW: I would say, with the new social media-social influencer age that we live in, I began hearing this term *soft life*. Leisure is part of the soft life. The young people I know, a few of my students and friends, they take the soft life seriously. They do not work above and beyond what is necessary to be able to have a good balance between work and their own soft leisure life. I do not know if they have adopted it here in Ghana. I do not know if it manifests in a sort of leisure. There is a pressure with life that does not allow you to fully embrace that leisure of soft life. For many people, a soft life comes at expense; you need to work for it. I was recently thinking about finding a remote job and then moving to Ghana. Technology has allowed people to generate income to support their soft life; for example, content creators and influencers. I see this section of the population in Africa and beyond can live that soft life, can have migration for leisure because they are tapped into this new economy that allows them to do that. But I think for everyday hustlers, it is very difficult. What is typical is that many have multiple jobs and are connected to family to whom they are responsible. One of my Ghanaian colleagues in the US ships goods home and operates farms and so on. He would say: "I am the first born of both sides of my family and the first to travel abroad. The responsibility on me is immense. I have to help my siblings with school fees." There is responsibility to share, at least to the degree that you can or are willing, and that in some ways constrains your leisure migration.

DT: Are these changing the ways in which migration and class are conceptualised?

MW: The meaning of class may be shifting beyond just the economic dimension to include ideas about prioritising ease, comfort, and aesthetics to perform a certain idea of life beyond your economic means. This soft life may ask us to rethink migration to include lifestyle migration or migrating digitally—to seek soft life elsewhere. But it still boils down to who has the resources and right skills to realise this possibility. There are still enduring structural inequalities that exist and circumscribe migration patterns that reproduce the very class hierarchies the soft life claims to transcend.

DT: That is one thing we flag in this volume, in line with Issa Shivji's argument that the class system based only on education and income is not tenable anymore, especially in relation to African migration. Also, people do not even need to move physically these days. So, we need a rethink of the class system and mobility. And you mentioned xenophobia from the beginning. So, how does the restrictive xenophobic right or the mobilisation targeted at so-called illegal migrants affect women migrants?

MW: I do not know if you saw the debate between African Americans and Africans on social media? When the US government started deporting Latinos, I think an African American said something along the lines of "it is time to also deport illegals who are also coming from the Caribbean and Africa." The African group jumped on it and it was contentious on both sides, especially on social media. When I saw the question, that was the only thing I could think about. This tension exists, and it has existed for a long time between African migrants and particular segments of African Americans within the American context. It takes a lot of education on both sides to understand each other. Some of my friends would say, "Madeleine, you know how hard we worked to get education, find employment and eventually moved to America. Why isn't it possible for African Americans to do the same?" I say in response, "it is not that they cannot do it; rather, the system is set up to always frustrate and constrain them. You come with a different mentality. You know who you are from Ghana; your identity is intact. After 400 years, they

are not treated differently than other (white) Americans. You are Johnny Just Come (newcomer) who does not carry the baggage that African Americans have struggled to navigate. Also, you are perceived as docile and easily governed. The immigration policies are to surveil you." There is xenophobia. It is racialised but also within the Black community. So, when you hear a rhetoric of "send these illegals back," which includes Africans, that is when it percolates. The tensions between those various groups are percolating now.

DT: You went through the US system, had your first degree, worked, and are now a citizen. Where do you place yourself within this debate?

MW: I place myself that I am not African American, but I understand the African American condition through both intellectual and selected experiences. I have read enough about it and experienced it through my African American friends who have enlightened me. I think for Africans, not everyone, there is a certain degree of a ceiling beyond which you can never cross in the US. We come in with a mentality that immigrants are here to succeed; we cannot fail and go back home, and so work really hard, which fits into the ethos of meritocracy within America, right? But at some point, you see that you do not belong and should not be in that position. I remember I did not get a leadership position and an African American colleague was the one to explain to me that "it is not because you are not qualified, but because of who you are and what you embody." Even though I am a citizen, I am never a hundred percent comfortable. You have to come to terms with what gives meaning to your presence there and then find other sources of meaning elsewhere. So, I like teaching, the students, and the feeling that I am impacting them. I like that part of my life because I am fulfilled as a teacher. But regarding my social relationships, family, and identity, I get that in Ghana.

DT: What advice do you have for aspiring African women scholars?

MW: I think, no matter what, do not compromise on standards and integrity, while not also being naïve, particularly if you stay in academia in the West. I would say: come home because there is so much work to do here and not enough good scholars. If I were my younger self and I reflect back on that

year, 2012 or so, just before I came up for tenure, I would have told myself: stay home, it would work out. I would have reassured myself it would work out and I would have been doing very well. I think lots of young people should come home because there are opportunities here. But if you decide to stay in the US or elsewhere, you have to let your work speak for itself. For example, people know me on my campus to be rigorous, flexible, and fair and that I produce good students who have moved on to do PhDs. Find something that you are good at and do it well in whatever institution you are in. But, ultimately, I will say: come home. When you come home aged 30 to 40, you will be fine. You will do more, you will accomplish more by staying here than over there.

DT: This has been a wonderful conversation. Thank you so much.

MW: Yes, thank you. Thank you for being so relaxed so that we could chat.

Travelling While Black: Essays Inspired by a Life on the Move by Nanjala Nyabola. London: C. Hurst & Co, 2020.

Christian Emmanuel Bruku

Nanjala Nyabola's *Travelling While Black: Essays Inspired by a Life on the Move* is a thought-provoking collection of travel reflections that probe what it means to move through a world that is hostile to Blackness, genderness, and foreignness. Nyabola's methodological approach combines a multi-country case study with a feminist poststructuralist lens, weaving her own lived experiences into broader political and historical contexts. This combination offers both scholarly depth and narrative accessibility, drawing readers into complex discussions on migration, borders, humanitarianism, and power, while grounding them in the realities of people whose mobility is constrained by systemic injustice. The author demonstrates that racialised, gendered, and classed mobilities are not confined to specific geographies, but are transnational, cutting across the Global North and South.

The book's 17 essays are loosely organised around themes of racialisation, class, gender, displacement, representation, identity, climate change, colonialism, and resistance. Chapter 1, "*M'pa Blan*: I Am Not White," is illustrative of Nyabola's analysis. In Haiti, she learns that *blan*, while literally meaning "white" in Haitian Creole, also signifies "foreigner" or "outsider," a term loaded with cultural and political significance. This definition challenges assumptions about privilege and identity, underscoring how race is contextually constructed and relational. Other essays delve into pressing political issues such as the weaponisation of visas and immigration systems (see, for example, Chapter 8, "Periodic Offerings to the Visa Gods," and Chapter 5, "The Sea that Eats Our Children"). The stories recounted by the author are crucial interventions that challenge dominant narratives of freedom and humanitarianism. They resonate with current ontologies of movement where people experience precarity of social mobility and physical migration. In

2024, for instance, Africans lost nearly US$70 million to denied visa applications to Europe (Madowo 2025).

At the outset, the author builds a key argument around the othering of people. Here, Nyabola foregrounds the enduring discriminations in travel, particularly against persons from poor countries who are raced, classed, or gendered, and who, because of their minoritised identities, must "prove" their worth to access travel. She explains that many migration discourses frame migrants from poor regions as either threats or assets. This framing, she argues, humanises some migrants while dehumanising others. Nyabola departs intellectually from these discourses by rejecting reductive binaries such as "safe" versus "unsafe" migration, pointing out that such dualistic framings legitimise migrants' othering.

The migrants' narrative of othering resonates with studies on the biometric state (Breckenridge 2014) and the surveillance of Blackness (Browne 2015). These studies illuminate how biometric materials such as passports are used to control, track, and restrain the mobility of people, particularly Black people. Nyabola's narrations lay bare the fact that contemporary mobility is a complex and entangled activity governed not only by the political economies of receiving states, which determine who is surveilled, welcomed, or excluded, but also by sending states, whose bureaucracies actively participate in this regulation. For example, sending states often impose restrictive exit requirements, sell passports to the wealthy, and collaborate with international security regimes through data-sharing agreements. These practices stratify mobility even before departure, privileging some economic and social classes, gender categories, nationalities, and language communities, while intensifying the precarity of those already marginalised. In this sense, surveillance begins at "home," where sending states filter their citizens in ways that reinforce global hierarchies of movement.

Building on the initial observation of othering, Nyabola also addresses the subject of race in many chapters of her book. She stresses that the politics of spatial and social mobility are neither neutral nor equity-oriented. Instead, they involve negotiating suspicion, racism, and policing at every point. She notes that physical migration is not the romanticised form of travel imagined through the lens of the Western backpacker; rather, it is a site of political

struggle in which one's racial identity plays a key role in determining success or failure. Indeed, being labelled *blan* ("foreigner") in Haiti vividly illustrates how racialised migration and class-based privilege intersect in shaping socio-spatial mobility. Although Nyabola is a Black African woman, the label *blan* positions her as an outsider with presumed access to economic and social privilege often denied to locals. In this context, *blan* blurs or collapses her racial and gendered identity into a classed category, reminding readers that foreignness itself can function as a form of privilege that affords mobility, even for Black travellers, in ways not equally available to natives of a particular locality.

Nyabola centres the race argument further, noting that racial identity, like culture, is hybrid and layered, and continues to undergo contestation and negotiation. As she explains, "race is one of the most fascinating constructions of the modern era, and travel has curious ways of throwing up its crude contradictions" (5). This point suggests the ephemerality, temporality and fluidity of race as people navigate borders. It also shows that racial identity itself is context-dependent and socially constructed. When racial identity traces imagined differences between people and between geographies, it leads to dangerous ideologies of marginalisation, including the policing of the mobility of Black people and other minoritarian bodies whose minority status—in feminist and critical theory circles—is not numerical but due to social and political processes of alienation.

Strongly bound to Nyabola's arguments on race and gender is the subject of class. Her account consistently highlights class—both as a structural force and as a form of lived positionality. She is explicit about her own mobility privilege and repeatedly highlights how material resources, institutional attachments, and classed social practices shape who can move, how, and with what dignity. It is worth mentioning that, in migration discourse, class refers not just to income but to a broader social and economic position shaped by access to wealth, education, networks, political influence, and even cultural capital, such as language proficiency. Class as an axis of mobility highlights two strands: mobility as a privilege versus mobility as a necessity. For the wealthy and middle class, mobility is often smoothed by resources. They can afford passports, visas, flights, and accommodation. For the poor, mobility is often dangerous, irregular, and marked by vulnerability. Paradoxically, lower classes

of people are often forced to migrate for survival due to insecurity or poverty, while the upper classes may migrate by choice, such as for education, business, or lifestyle opportunities. Class thus divides not just who moves, but the experiences and quality of movement. Nyabola foregrounds these class experiences by documenting the simulated lives of many foreign aid workers in Haiti—the "gilded cage" of gated suburbs and drivers—contrasted with the constrained mobility of those the aid apparatus claims to serve. She also shows how middle- and upper-class Black travellers navigate cities and borders differently from working-class and poor Black people.

Class not only shapes South–North or North–South migration patterns and experiences; indeed, within the African continent, many mobility patterns and experiences are also shaped by class structures. Evidence abounds that class differentiates the experiences of "free movement," with the rich flying above mobility obstacles while the poor are immobilised by them. In West Africa, for instance, the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Protocol on Free Movement theoretically allows citizens to travel across borders. But in practice, border guards often harass travellers, extort monies with amounts determined based on perceived status, and sometimes prevent them from crossing. It may be easier for business elites to travel across the ECOWAS region because of their ability to pay the requested amounts. In other parts of the continent, such as South Africa, class has been a determinant of migrants' exposure to hostility. For example, xenophobic violence is often directed not at elite African expatriates, but at working-class migrants. Zimbabwean farm workers and Malawian cleaners disproportionately suffer xenophobic attacks compared to higher- and middle-class migrants working in sectors such as information and communication technology or education. In North Africa, wealthy Sudanese elites fleeing conflict in Khartoum rent apartments in Cairo and continue their businesses, while poorer Sudanese end up in precarious refugee camps in Aswan or on Cairo's margins, facing labour exploitation.

Considering these examples alongside Nyabola's essays, *Travelling While Black* invites us to understand race, gender, and class as mutually constitutive axes of privilege and vulnerability in the politics of global mobility.

In addition to examining race, class, gender, and the dynamics of othering, the author foregrounds the importance of representation in migration discourses and praxes. The ways in which migrants are portrayed in the media, arts, literature, policy, and other cultural platforms play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and dominant worldviews about them. When such representations are embedded in power asymmetries and processes of racialisation, they often obscure the complex identities of migrants and profoundly influence both their ability to move and the nature of their migratory experience. Poststructuralists like Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze have illuminated how marginality is produced through (mis)representation (Foucault 2005; Deleuze 1994). Thus, the subject of representation, particularly in the context of physical migration and social mobility, must be discussed beyond mere rhetoric. It requires careful interrogation of the powers and motives behind narratives, labels, and discourses on migrants. It also requires a careful examination of how socially constructed knowledges on migration and mobility produce and reproduce new forms of immobility and marginality.

Travelling While Black also engages climate change as a vital context for understanding contemporary mobility. Nyabola reflects on climate-induced displacement, particularly how women bear a disproportionate burden and are often forced into informal and frequently exploitative migration routes. In the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region of West Africa, for instance, climate-related displacement often pushes women into informal economies or exploitative care work abroad, intensifying both mobility and gender precarity. The author's call for justice in migration and mobility demands thinking not only about who moves, but who is allowed to move with dignity. To arrive at this point of dignity requires breaking the current weaponisation of climate migration.

From a decolonial perspective, the book sheds light on the enduring legacies of colonialism in current physical migration and socioeconomic mobility experiences. The author questions the trope of empowerment that is not rooted in mutual dignity and equity. From a postcolonial feminist lens, the book highlights the inequalities and oppressions experienced by women and minoritised groups during their physical migration and social mobility across space and time. The central assumption is that there is a material history of mobility rooted in colonialism, which must be taken into consideration in

understanding how contemporary mobility is shaped, particularly that of Black women. The author highlights that even when migrant Black women experience empowerment, this process is often biased. That is, the elevated position of the migrant Black woman is not necessarily a sign of social progress but rather a reflection of neocolonial structures in which her status as a foreign woman is favoured or respected. The author links colonial legacies to contemporary issues of xenophobia, poverty, and political dysfunction in Africa, highlighting both the incompleteness of decolonisation and the need to address lingering hegemonic systems. The book illustrates, for instance, how legacies of colonisation-induced racial segregation continue to permeate urban planning frameworks and reproduce spatial disarticulations in African cities, a phenomenon that sometimes constrains the mobility of minority groups. These perspectives resonate with viewpoints of postcolonial writers who have volubly pointed out that the process of colonialism privileged some races (whites over Blacks), classes (intellectuals and businesspeople over peasants), and geographies (urban over rural), while simultaneously gendering the privileges accorded to people. Not surprisingly, for Africans—positioned at the periphery of the world system—migration and social mobility are already couched in a frame of underdevelopment.

Finally, the author focuses on the reimagining of identity and empathy for resisting migration-linked marginalisation. As illustrated in the book, small acts of resistance, fearless travel, and the cultivation of empathy are crucial tools for change. Nyabola also highlights how mobility serves as a powerful catalyst for one's own evolving understanding of the self and the world. The author demonstrates that preconceived notions of "home" and "belonging" are dismantled through travel (35). Home, from Nyabola's viewpoint, is an unstable concept for the Black, female, and mobile subjects. Through connections with Haitian girls in a gender-based violence support group, the author found a site of mutual learning, vulnerability, and feminist solidarity across differences. Furthermore, her experiences in Haiti, where she found "intellectual freedom" (that is, the freedom to redefine herself), and in Burkina Faso, where she learnt that "fear is never a good reason not to do something" (37), demonstrate how confronting discomfort can lead to profound self-discovery and a renewed commitment to justice. By reimagining the self-identity and experiences of empathy, the author learnt to call out subtle and

overt forms of racism and systemic violence, urging readers to work towards dismantling structures that maintain global inequalities. Approaches to dismantling mobility-linked marginalisations may take everyday forms of resistance, including quiet refusals to conform, subtle subversions of dominant narratives, and the deliberate cultivation of alternative solidarities that challenge prevailing hierarchies of power. Though *Travelling While Black* is a compelling and theoretically rich contribution to feminist scholarship and migration studies, gaps remain for further enquiry. While Nyabola briefly notes the exclusion of queer voices from the literary canon, and the vulnerability of sexual minorities to the weaponisation of tribe, the material realities of travelling while queer in Africa remain underdeveloped. Future research must ask how African LGBTQ+ travellers navigate borders governed by both colonial-era sodomy laws and modern religious ethics. Similarly, while Nyabola acknowledges her own physical ability as a form of privilege, the intersection of disability and African mobility needs further attention, particularly how administrative harassment at borders may uniquely constrain disabled African women. Beyond these gaps, the book evokes productive questions for reflection. For example, can true Pan-Africanism exist within the framework of the capitalist, postcolonial state? Nyabola's reflections on xenophobia in South Africa and the "un-homing" of Somalis in Kenya invite us to ponder whether the idea that "no African is a foreigner in Africa" is a lived reality or merely empty rhetoric.

Ultimately, the book underscores the value of critical social theory for unpacking how gendered, classed, and racialised mobilities are continually produced and regulated across social spaces. It invites further enquiry into the asymmetrical power relations that underpin global migration regimes.

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Dream Count by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. New York: Knopf, 2025.

Malaika Selasie Patel

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Dream Count* is a rich, reflective narrative that navigates the emotional territories of womanhood, class, migration, and desire. Structured through the intimate reflections of Chiamaka, Zikora, Kadiatou, and Omelogor, the book explores how dreams, memory, and identity are shaped by global inequalities and personal longings. Also, through the characters' personal reflections and interwoven stories, Adichie constructs a world where women are constantly asked to explain their pain, justify their dreams, and negotiate the cost of desiring more and how various migration trajectories shape them. Given the present global regulations that restrict mobility and dehumanise immigrants, as well as the recent mass deportations of long-term residents in the West under increased nationalist ideology, Adichie's examination of migration takes on new relevance.

Adichie's work explores the layered nuances of migration, not only as physical movement, but also as a form of symbolic transformation. She examines the classed and racialised gatekeeping embedded within immigration processes through Kadiatou, a working-class immigrant women working as a hotel cleaner and housekeeper, who curates a narrative for her asylum application designed to satisfy immigration authorities. Seeking to escape an abusive past and secure a future for her daughter, Kadiatou is nevertheless penalised for her act of survival rather than recognised for the trauma she endured. The novel poses the uncomfortable question of whether victims must be perfect to be granted justice, exposing the harshness of migratory regimes that criminalise desperation while disregarding the structural conditions that compel people to migrate. *Dream Count* reveals how many migrants are not only victims of the law, but also of an idealised America that portrays itself as a nation of comfort and opportunity. This demonstrates the brutal contrasts of global movement: the promise of freedom is often accompanied by new

constraints, and immigration regimes sometimes punish the very desperation they profess to safeguard.

This literary work uses Kadiatou's story to challenge the notion of meritocracy at the core of Western immigration policies, where only those who perform the correct type of suffering, packaged in bureaucratically acceptable terms, are permitted a chance at legitimacy. Adichie questions whether the current nation-state can ever adequately account for the complexities of displacement, especially because legality and morality are sometimes mismatched. Alongside seeking freedom through migration, Adichie presents a distinct migratory arc; one of reinvention and eventual disappointment. She challenges the West's idea of self-reinvention through the character of Omelogor, who leaves Nigeria in search of atonement, expecting the West to offer not merely opportunity but moral rebirth, an expectation ultimately exposed as illusory. This is evident in the academic space, where migrants are often misunderstood, disregarded, or condescended to, their ideas dismissed without justification and their critiques subjected to disproportionate scrutiny. The growing cynicism and wish to return home reflect a common experience in migrant journeys, where the promise of the West often gives way to disillusionment. As Grace Musila (2017) observes, many migrants come to understand "home" not only as a place of return, but as a space for recovering self-worth and belonging after facing racial and gender barriers abroad. The notion that one can "start over" in the West is shattered, particularly for women who do not conform to prescribed gender expectations that position them as obedient caregivers responsible for domestic duties and discourage them from questioning authority or speaking freely. Omelogor's perspective on expectations from society marks her as a deviant, since she exhibits intellectual assertiveness and openly expresses her views on issues.

Omelogor's criticism of American academia as less a site of enquiry than one of ideology exposes the limits of its alleged liberalism, where even institutions ostensibly committed to social justice remain entrenched in racial and class inequities. Her comment that "America makes more sense when you look at it from the outside" (68) points to the contradictions of Western freedom and the psychological dislocations produced by transnational life. The choice to relocate, remain, or return is always hidden in larger networks of responsibility, guilt, and performance. For many African women, the stakes of

migration are not only personal, but also communal. This load puts a lot of strain on people, especially when success is measured only by material wealth or professional achievement, rendering migration both an opportunity and a source of constant accountability.

Adichie demonstrates how the migrant subject, particularly the African woman, is expected to embody achievement not just for herself but also for her family, community, and, in certain cases, her nation. Women's migrations, whether across nations or social classes, are never just personal decisions, but rather actions embedded in political, economic, and cultural hierarchies (Mama 1997). Their movement is a compromise with both patriarchy and progressive capitalism. Survival migration represents what Musila (2017) refers to as "the im/possibilities of the margins" in which African women's migrations are both enabling and restricting—acts of agency accompanied by exclusion. Adichie's narrative also aligns with Obioma Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of "nego-feminism," or "feminism of negotiation; no-ego feminism," which stresses how African women manage repressive institutions through flexibility, communal care, and covert resistance, rather than outright revolt. Within African feminist migration literature, these dynamics call for a reconsideration of movement as an interrelated process shaped by gendered expectations, social hierarchies, and cultural responsibility. As Mama and Nnaemeka remind us, the personal is directly related to the political; it is through women's lived experiences that bigger systems of inequality are supported and challenged.

The novel also explores the tensions between African immigrants and African Americans through Chiamaka's relationship with Darnell, who weaponises historical grievance and class resentment to undermine her. Darnell says, "You know Chia's people probably sold my people?" (22), referring to the terrible heritage of African involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. His comment, disguised in comedy, indicates a deeper dissatisfaction with Chiamaka's money and position as a Nigerian immigrant, what he refers to as "fancy-ass." Beneath the humour is a frustration shaped by class and different life experiences. Adichie shows how privilege and opportunity can create tension within Black communities, where people's understanding of race depends on where they come from and what chances they have had. Adichie uses this to show how class differences can cause

mistrust and distance, even among people who share the same racial identity. According to Bernard Dayo (2021), some African Americans believe that African immigrants gain from civil rights efforts without fully knowing or recognising their historical background, while some Africans accept stereotypes and fail to acknowledge African American cultural validity. Adichie does not provide a conclusion but rather demonstrates how such hereditary traumas re-emerge in human interactions, influenced by race, class, and migration. The issue of responsibility and reparation gets complicated: Chiamaka is burdened with guilt for a history she did not create, while Darnell masks his anguish with passive-aggressive superiority.

As Adichie reveals the complex compromises of gender and affection, the story raises questions about power dynamics within relationships. What happens to mutual understanding when caring and intellect become ways to control? If women are constantly encouraged to soften their intelligence or suppress their discomfort to maintain harmony, should the burden of emotional balance fall on them, or should we instead question the social systems that normalise such silencing as an expression of love? A similar tension emerges in Adichie's portrayal of Chiamaka and Darnell's relationship, which begins as an intellectual connection, yet gradually reveals how tenderness can mask dominance. Darnell's fixation on correcting and reframing Chiamaka's ideas reflects a larger societal dynamic in which a woman's emotional reality is considered invalid unless it aligns with male comfort, while her fears are dismissed as hormonal or trivial. This demonstrates how love, when shaped by uneven power, may become a form of silence. Adichie skilfully depicts how women's sorrow is frequently overlooked under the guise of affection, and how love, shaped by power inequalities, can devolve into self-erasure. Adichie's treatment of this relationship is nuanced and cumulative, allowing readers to gradually see how charm and control can coexist in one person, and how women frequently confuse emotional manipulation for love, connection, or care. Chiamaka's story is a cautionary tale about the cost of investing in a partner who demands your silence as proof of your depth.

Adichie shifts attention to the generational transfer of endurance and blame within patriarchal systems, revealing through the novel's portrayal of motherhood how women are socialised to accept responsibility for male

misdeeds and uphold cultural institutions that equate virtue with silence. The narrative depicts how women are frequently pushed to bear the guilt for men's wrongs while being rewarded for remaining silent and strong. However, Adichie rejects the notion that stillness and perseverance indicate weakness; instead, she portrays them as techniques women have evolved over time to survive and assert themselves. This is consistent with Mama's (1997) argument that women's responsibilities in maintaining family and community unity, while productive, are also susceptible to exploitation. Adichie shows us that silence may be a sign of intelligence and choice, not just submission. The true question is not whether women fight back, but rather how they transform endurance into a deliberate act of resistance.

The emotional balance of the book comes not just from the individual experiences, but also from the way women care for one another: Chiamaka's support for Zikora through her pregnancy, the shared concern for Kadiatou's as she navigates her legal battle, and a broader sense of feminine solidarity form an alternative network of survival. Their care extends beyond friendship, becoming a collective act of resistance in a world that isolates women and demands silence of women. These relationships embody the feminist concept of community, in which empathy and collective care challenge the competitive and individualistic values that frequently shape modern life. The women's care for one another demonstrates how connection can be political; by caring together, they regain power, belonging, and the ability to create their own kinds of strength. It also promotes female friendship as a space for empathy, resistance, and healing. Chiamaka, Zikora, Kadiatou, and Omelogor's emotional labour exposes a common place for narrating and reinterpreting grief. The women in *Dream Count* find significance through one another. Their connections are more than just a source of consolation; they are silent acts of resistance, spaces for mutual witnessing and understanding. These relationships, particularly those that span class lines, call into question the idea that compassion must stem from similarity. Instead, they demonstrate how understanding may emerge from shared vulnerability. These connections also represent a rejection of seclusion, quiet, and the neoliberal narrative that portrays women as competitors. Chiamaka's modest gestures of care, such as cooking, listening, or showing up unexpectedly, establish a picture of

community that transcends location and status. She presents us with real women who are prepared to sit in the discomfort of each other's realities.

The book reminds us that migration does not necessarily imply a move forward, that love can be both a salve and a blade, and that dreaming, particularly as a woman—African, or migrant—is sometimes a form of resistance. Adichie explores how cultural inheritance and choice influence identity through the language of dreams, hopes, betrayals, and renewals, connecting personal longing to broader feminist themes of freedom and defining oneself. The stories of the characters inspire readers to consider: What sacrifices have I made to become who I am? What am I still dreaming about? And how much of that dream is mine, truly mine?

In conversation with scholars such as bell hooks, who argues that patriarchal ideology conditions men to perceive their domination of women as natural and justified, Adichie's *Dream Count* offers a radically feminist, transnational lens through which to examine gender, class, and migration, advocating for a reimagining of power not only in public institutions but also in private relationships, and inviting readers to reflect on their own dreams and the costs of pursuing them. Adichie transforms personal memories into collective reflections. Rooted in the grief of her mother's death, the novel grows into something more, a reflection on how women globally learn to endure, stay strong, and keep reimagining their lives in the face of loss or failure. Migration and class weave across their lives, demonstrating how privilege and dislocation coexist. The book's emotional pulse is centred on modest acts of care, with women holding space for one another in the midst of loss, pain, desire, and separation.

Adichie explained that she did not initially realise she was writing about her mother, but rather about "female connection;" however, the two are intertwined. She honours a lineage of women forged by endurance and mutual recognition, evoked through her mother's imagined sigh, as if her mother were present to read the novel: "Nwanyi ibe m," (my fellow woman) (Egan 2025). In giving her mother the final word, she respects not just her own memories, but also the generations of women whose quiet bravery enables survival.

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Women in Africa by Toyin Falola and Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso. London: Routledge, 2025.

Afua A. Yeboah and Nana-Anna Abaka-Cann

Scholarship on African women, although a subject so vast and consequential, is so persistently marginalised within the disciplines that claim to explain the African world. This textbook, *Women in Africa* by Toyin Falola and Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso, arrives as a deliberate correction to this erasure. In this comprehensive single-volume work, Falola and Yacob-Haliso state that the "book explores the various ways in which gender has been constructed in different African cultures across history and how this has impacted the lived experiences of women … [and] invites us to think again about the changing roles, identities, and contributions of African women across space and time" (iii). In 22 chapters spanning the pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial lives of women, the textbook covers an extraordinary range of topics, from history, health, religion, and sexuality to economic life, migration, feminist theory, popular culture, peacebuilding, and social media.

The textbook is divided into four parts: African women in history; social lives and livelihoods; bodies and being; and political and social agency. Part I traces women's agency from ancient Egypt, the Kingdom of Kush, Nok culture, and Bantu societies through colonialism and apartheid, closing with a genealogy of African feminisms. Part II covers topics on motherhood, marriage, education, economic activities, science and technology, racism and colourism, religion, and popular culture. Part III addresses gendered sexualities, women's health, sex work, and gender-based violence. Lastly, Part IV, which examines politics, conflict and peacebuilding, women writers, social media, and migration, is the most generative, especially for scholars working within African feminist frameworks. Considering the editorial concerns of this volume, our review assesses the extent to which the textbook contributes to African feminisms, feminist decoloniality, and Black feminist epistemologies, with specific emphasis on intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989, 1991).

The textbook's overarching argument is that African women are not passive subjects of history but the architects of it. The theoretical positioning regarding the construct of gender is declared early and ambitiously. The authors situate gender in their theorisations and show how, on the African continent today, "gender is taken to be a pervasive and deeply embedded social structure" and that the category of "women" must never be homogenised but must instead be analysed through the intersecting pressures of race, class, ethnicity, religion, age, sexuality, nationality, and (dis)ability (2). They are equally explicit in naming the epistemic injustice that has kept African women marginalised in the Western hegemonic academy, the androcentrism of African Studies itself, and the way feminist scholarship has historically centred the concerns of white, Western, middle-class women while rendering African feminist intellectual traditions invisible.

The textbook demonstrates a clear commitment to African and feminist decoloniality frameworks. The engagement with African feminisms in Chapter 5 is a genealogical intervention that dismantles the "waves" metaphor that is a feature associated with the linearity of Western feminist tradition. Instead, they situate and trace African feminist thought in the pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial times in Africa. The genealogy of African feminisms, such as womanism, Africana womanism, STIWANISM (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), motherism, negofeminism, and snail-sense feminism, is surveyed with admirable breadth. The approach of treating topics in Part II as interlocking systems is a refusal of the linearity associated with Western hegemonic knowledge production. Rather, they are presented as interlocking sites where patriarchy, colonial legacies, and women's agency are continually negotiated. This is exemplified in the chapter on motherhood where the authors draw on the work of some Black and African scholars, including Patricia Hill Collins and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, and refuse the glorification and the victimisation of African mothers. Rather, they expose the outsized social costs borne by women, a consequence of what is described as the "superwoman" expectation. The chapter on economic activities makes a similar structural argument, naming colonial dispossession and the devaluation of feminised labour as causes of the positioning of women in African society today. Their theorising of gender within feminist movements sets a decolonial

standard that is crucial for understanding and centring the lived experiences of women on the African continent today.

The textbook's most significant strength lies in its systematic recovery and affirmation of African women's historical agency across all of its four parts. Chapter 22 resonates strongly with this issue's concern for how gender and class intersect and mediate who moves, how they move, and what resources and opportunities are available to them. Chapter 20 on African women writers covers themes of migration, racism, identity, and cosmopolitanism in contemporary African women's writings. Chapter 21 on women's agency and social media traces how African women have used social media platforms both as spaces of activism and as economic tools. These chapters reflect the authors' attentiveness to mobility not only as a physical phenomenon but also as a social, cultural and digital phenomenon. Together, they offer a rich picture of African women navigating and contesting the boundaries of movement.

The textbook's account of colonialism as a gendered project is rigorous and politically clear and shows affinity with the extensive African feminist scholarship. It shows how religion, the cash-crop economy, indirect rule, and colonial education worked jointly to dispossess women of land, political authority, and active participation in the public sphere. It foregrounds women's resistances to the processes of political domination, dispossession and extraction, from Empress Taytu Betul at Adwa to the 1929 Women's War in southeastern Nigeria. It applies intersectional analysis to apartheid South Africa, which was cast as a region with marked differences from the colonial histories of other regions of the African continent. Falola and Yacob-Haliso's conception of African women and their experiences transcends the geographical boundaries of the continent and, in that framing, guides their analysis of African women in the diaspora, racism, and colourism (Chapter 11).

Chapter 19 on conflict and peacebuilding is a standout, as the authors take the time and care to distinguish between the formal mechanisms of institutional inclusion (United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, quota frameworks) and the organic, community-rooted peacebuilding that African women have historically practised long before such formal mechanisms existed. Examples such as Leymah Gbowee's movement in Liberia, the

grassroots women's coalitions of post-genocide Rwanda, and the women peacekeepers of the African Union Mission in Somalia are not presented as exceptional cases but as structural expressions of African feminist agency. Chapter 21 tracks how African women have used digital platforms and social media as sites of feminist activism, including #BringBackOurGirls, #EndSARS, and the North African uprisings, as new terrains of solidarity and resistance.

The textbook is not without its tensions, and a decolonial feminist reading makes several of them visible. The most structurally significant is one that the authors acknowledge, noting that the book was "tough to write partly because disagreements and debates in the scholarship often mirror real-world social divisions and partly because Western gender discourse and experience have evolved differently from those of African women" (xxvii). Yet, the conditions of this textbook's own production partially reproduce the hierarchies it critiques. This is not a reason to diminish its value because it is a productive contradiction that African feminist scholarship has long inhabited. But it is one that, as critical reviewers operating with a decolonial lens, cannot be left unremarked.

A related tension concerns the recovery of pre-colonial women's agency in Chapter 1. While honestly situating these recoveries within live scholarly debates about patriarchy, women's agency, and gender complementarity, the authors are careful not to slide into hagiography by acknowledging that "while society was far from being uniformly egalitarian, women had privileges and opportunities" (48) that colonialism would systematically dismantle. While they acknowledge that "all known precolonial states represented patriarchies" (48) even as it stresses women's remarkable agency within them, the analytical tension between these two positions needed to be more fully worked through. This is partly a historiographical constraint that the authors inherit rather than create, as African historical writing has long privileged heroic, exceptional narratives over the everyday stories of agency that characterised ordinary women's lives. Consequently, individual exceptional figures such as queens, warrior leaders, and priestesses end up carrying a disproportionate share of the evidentiary weight for claims about women's agency more generally. The structural conditions under which ordinary women lived, not as queens or priestesses but agricultural labourers, market women, enslaved women, and

women in subordinate kin positions, receive far less attention. Elite women's exceptional power thus risks becoming evidence for all women's agency, precisely the homogenisation they caution against. Chapter 22 on migration opens productively, but frames women's migration through a predominantly middle-class lens, leaving working-class women's experiences of precarity insufficiently theorised. Hence, an explicit acknowledgement of this constraint, and its implications for what kinds of recovery are possible, would have strengthened the chapter considerably.

The genealogy of African feminisms in Chapter 5 illustrates a further tension. The survey format, which moves briskly through each variant, tends to obscure important differences, thus producing an effect of intellectual abundance without deep critical engagement. For instance, motherism is noted to be "limited by its emphasis on a woman's obligation to society in a role that sometimes perpetuates her marginalisation" (125), but this critique occupies a single paragraph without further analysis. A more searching interrogation of how some of these frameworks, particularly those that centre biological motherhood or African values, run the risk of reinscribing essentialist notions of womanhood that African feminist scholarship has worked hardest to dismantle, would have been helpful. A similar unevenness appears in Part II in the depth of engagement with heteropatriarchy as a structural category. Particularly on motherhood and marriage, the description of patriarchal arrangements occasionally outpaces their critical interrogation. The authors acknowledge the "glorification" of motherhood to "such an extent that its responsibilities and expectations became outsized to human ability" (146), yet the structural question of how working-class women specifically experience these burdens under economic precarity surfaces only in pockets. The critique names the burden without fully theorising the class-differentiated ways in which it is distributed and lived. Similarly, masculinities remain largely in the background and not sustained throughout the textbook. Men and masculine norms appear as the conditions against which women's experiences are defined rather than the subjects of rigorous gendered analysis.

Chapter 10 on science and technology nearly repeats the very thing it critiques, limiting its celebration of women in STEM to those with Western credentials while overlooking how science and technology operate in the domestic spheres of women's lives. Despite the authors' firm commitment to

the principle that Africa is not a country and their warning against "homogenising, decontextualising, and over-generalising" (6), the continent-wide scope produces a gravitational pull towards West African and South African case studies, leaving women from other regions appearing only sporadically.

Lastly, the book commits explicitly to intersectionality as a method, foregrounding race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and age throughout. Yet (dis)ability, which the authors name in the introduction as a necessary axis, did not make it to the rest of the substantive analysis. Given how they argue against single-axis explanations, this is a significant gap.

We want to emphasise that our critiques have been generated by holding the textbook to the demanding standards set by the authors. *Women in Africa* provides students and scholars with the most accessible and comprehensive entry point available for the study of African women. It foregrounds African feminist intellectual traditions and refuses continental generalisation while attempting to achieve a continent-wide scope. It also consistently insists on intersectionality not as a rhetorical gesture but as an analytical practice. Readers seeking a theorised account of migration and social class as organising frameworks will need to supplement it with more focused scholarship. Importantly, this textbook serves as a foundational text that maps the terrain on which such theorisation must occur. Specifically, the textbook offers a theorisation that recovers and recentres the historical agency of African women, names the structures that have constrained such agency, and reimagines the agentic power of African women as one that does not require liberation but rather remains part of African women's lives and identities.

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