

Intertextuality, Afropolitanism, and the Humanitarian Gaze in *Selasi's Ghana Must Go* and *Bulawayo's We Need New Names*

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Abstract

Contemporary African fiction increasingly emerges from transnational locations where Africa and its Diasporas are imagined across overlapping literary media spheres. This paper examines Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, as means towards exploring how inter-textual practices shape the evolving images of Africa - home and in migrancy discourse. This study foregrounds how such forms actively absorb and transform prior texts, genres and discourses. Drawing on intertextuality theory as analytical framework, especially from Julia Kristeva's notion of the text as a "mosaic of quotations" and Africanist accounts of textual relations, the analysis adopts intertextuality as its primary analytical lens. The work adopts qualitative, interpretive method, based on a close reading of selected scenes, narrative voices and recurrent images that pervade the experiences in the texts. The analysis reveals the point that both novels resist linear migration plots by constructing dense intertextual mosaics in which Lagos, Accra, Harare, Paradise and the American suburb continually echo, ironise and echo one another. Selasi and Bulawayo simultaneously inhabit and critique Afropolitan and media scripts of crisis-ridden Africa while reworking the family saga and coming-of-age forms to expose uneven mobility, childhood vulnerability and the politics of looking at African suffering. The study argues that intertextuality as narrative convergence extends debates on Afropolitanism, African world literature and the new African diaspora, and at the same time offers a model for deeper understanding of African literary, postcolonial and diaspora realities.

Keywords: intertextuality; African diaspora; Afropolitanism; humanitarian discourse; contemporary African fiction

Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed a remarkable proliferation of Anglophone African novels that are set partly or wholly outside the continent and that are written by authors whose lives move between African cities and metropolitan centres in Europe and North America. Critics have frequently grouped these writers under the contested label of "Afropolitanism," a term that signals the emergence of a mobile, multilingual African middle class whose identities are shaped by multiple cities, passports and cultural repertoires (Selasi, "Bye-Bye, Babar"; Skinner). Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013) and Bulawayo's *We Need New*

Names (2013) are central texts within this landscape. Both are debut novels by authors who left Africa as young people yet remain deeply immersed in African social realities. Each work narrates a double trajectory. In *Ghana Must Go* the fracturing and partial reassembly of a Ghanaian–Nigerian family across Ghana, Nigeria and the United States; in *We Need New Names* the movement of a Zimbabwean child from a shantytown called Paradise to an uneasy life as an immigrant teenager.

Much of the scholarship on these novels tend to focus on themes of displacement, fractured belonging, the dilemma of return, childhood vulnerability and the ethics of representing African suffering (Mavengano; Evans; “No Place like Home”). Less attention has been paid to the specific intertextual strategies through which *Ghana Must Go* and *We Need New Names* construct “Africa” and “diaspora” as narrative objects. Both novels are saturated with echoes: children recite Bible verses and phrases heard from foreign visitors; satellite television and news bulletins about crisis punctuate domestic scenes; familiar images from charity campaigns, fragile bodies, shacks, queues for aid are replayed, parodied and made to speak; and generational disputes about “home” are staged through explicit and implicit dialogue with earlier African texts.

To read these novels only as sociological accounts of Afropolitanism or as testimonies of crisis, is therefore to miss a crucial dimension of how they work. Intertextuality, since Kristeva first coined the term, has become a central concept in literary and cultural studies. Yet its implications for African diaspora fiction, and especially for fiction that self-consciously inhabits and revises global images of Africa, have not been fully explored. This article argues that *Ghana Must Go* and *We Need New Names* are best understood as intertextual mosaics in which African, Western and transnational discourses are absorbed, juxtaposed and transformed.

Furthermore, debates around Afropolitanism and the “new African diaspora” often oscillate between celebration and suspicion. In her influential essay “Bye-Bye, Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)” Selasi portrays Afropolitans as Africans of the world: city-dwellers who are equally at home in Lagos, London and New York, fluent in multiple languages and cultural codes, and impatient with reductive images of Africa as poverty or war (Selasi, “Bye-Bye, Babar”). Subsequent scholarship welcomes Afropolitanism as a way of naming an emergent African modernity, yet also warns that it can slide into lifestyle branding and elite consumption, detaching African identities from local histories of inequality (Skinner 2017; Toivanen 2017).

Within this debate, *Ghana Must Go* has been read as both an Afropolitan family saga and a critique of the limits of Afropolitan privilege, while *We Need New Names* has sparked controversy over whether its vivid depictions of Zimbabwean deprivation and migrant precarity reproduce a Western humanitarian aesthetic of African suffering or subvert it from within (Habla; Mavengano; Evans). These discussions tend to focus on themes, character types and the politics of representation. By contrast, the formal mechanisms through which the novels

position themselves within and against existing archives of African images are comparatively under-analysed.

Studies of *We Need New Names* acknowledge its engagement with global media and charitable narratives but mostly treat these as content rather than as deep structuring principles (Mavengano 2019; Evans 2022). Work on *Ghana Must Go* attends to its portrayal of Afropolitan identity, family trauma and the ambivalent “return” to Ghana, yet rarely explores how the novel's fragmented narrative, stylistic choices and recurrent motifs echo and revise both earlier African anglophone fiction and Western migrant family sagas (Bordin; “No Place like Home”). At the level of theory, intertextuality remains largely imported from Euro-American contexts and is often used descriptively in African criticism without being rethought in light of African oral and visual traditions (Allen 2019; Kehinde 2003).

There is therefore a need for intertextual perspective in the analytic focus on *Ghana Must Go* and *We Need New Names* towards appropriating their shared creative concerns together rather than doing so in isolation. Such a study must consider how both novels weave humanitarian, religious and media discourses into their structures; how they echo and transform African literary canons, and how such echoes shape and reshape the politics of representing Africa and its Diasporas in a global milieu.

The objectives of the study are further focused to provide sustained intersexual scholarship in both novels towards foregrounding the dialogic engagements with multiple textual and visual archives; to show how the engagements serve to shape the representations of African urban spaces, childhood, family and migrancy; and to demonstrate that the point that attention to intertextual form deepens our understanding of Afropolitanism beyond sociological or thematic accounts. By placing Selasi and Bulawayo side by side, the article aims to illuminate the interwoven frame of Africa–diaspora relations and to suggest how intertextuality itself can be re-theorised from African locations (Kehinde 2003).

Literature Review

The conceptual foundations of intertextuality lie in Kristeva's reinterpretation of Bakhtin's ideas on dialogism and heteroglossia. For Kristeva, every text is a “mosaic of quotations” and an “absorption and transformation of another text,” meaning that no text is ever wholly original but always formed through its relations to prior discourses (“Word, Dialogue and Novel” 37). Graham Allen notes that this intertextual view shifts critical attention from individual authors to networks of textual interaction and to the reader's recognition of echoes and allusions (35–39). The entry on “Intertextuality” in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* similarly emphasises that intertextuality includes explicit citations as well as more diffuse references to genre conventions, narrative patterns and visual codes.

Africanist critics have adapted these insights to the specificities of African literary

production. Aderemi Kehinde argues that intertextuality is “a crucial aesthetic strategy” in African fiction, enabling writers to “revisit and revise earlier representations of colonialism, nationalism and postcolonial disillusionment” by echoing and rewriting canonical works (Kehinde 373). In African contexts, intertextuality operates not only among written texts but also across oral genres, proverbs, songs and communal histories. Kehinde's work underscores that intertextual reading must attend to indigenous archives as well as to European canons.

Critical engagement with *We Need New Names* has been rich but unevenly intertextual. Edmore Mavengano's “Kaka Country” explicitly uses Kristevan intertextuality to read Bulawayo's novel alongside other Zimbabwean narratives of crisis, showing how it reworks national dysfunction and displacement (Mavengano 3–5). Catherine Evans's analysis of “Embodied Selves / Disembodied Subjects” foregrounds the novel's representation of the body as a site of home and exile, and notes its engagement with global images of African suffering, though without fully theorising these as intertexts (Evans 3–7). Reviewed essays by Helon Habila and others highlight the novelist's use of a child narrator and the bold depiction of violence and precarity, but largely frame it in terms of authenticity and reception rather than textual relations.

On *Ghana Must Go*, scholarship has concentrated on Afropolitan identity and the politics of return. Elisa Bordin situates Selasi's novel within the “new African diaspora,” arguing that it exemplifies Afropolitanism's “divided subjectivities” and complex class positioning (Bordin). The article “No Place like Home” reads *Ghana Must Go* alongside Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust* to explore anxieties of return and the difficulty of reclaiming a home that has become strange (“No Place like Home” 46–47). Emanuel Ucham's thesis reads the novel as an Afropolitan text that stages “African hybrid” identities, though his attention falls mainly on character and theme rather than on intertextual form (Ucham 50–56).

The Afropolitanism debate itself provides an important intertextual field for the novels. Selasi's essay constructs Afropolitans as “not citizens, but Africans of the world” whose lives traverse multiple continents (Selasi, “Bye-Bye, Babar”). Ryan Skinner cautions that Afropolitan discourse risks becoming a “neoliberal cultural politics” that commodifies African difference for global markets while downplaying structural inequality (Skinner 6–9). Toivanen likewise maps tensions between Afropolitanism as emancipatory and as elitist. These discussions provide a critical frame within which readers approach *Ghana Must Go* in particular, making Afropolitanism an extra-textual intertext that the novel must negotiate.

This article builds on these strands of scholarship but shifts the emphasis from thematic concerns to the textual mechanisms of allusion, echo and transformation. It proposes that reading *Ghana Must Go* and *We Need New Names* together through intertextuality brings into view a shared project: the re-voicing of humanitarian and media images of Africa, the reworking of the African family saga form, and the critical habitation of Afropolitan discourse.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close reading of the two novels and of relevant theoretical and critical texts. The primary materials are Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* in their first English editions (Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*; Bulawayo). Secondary materials include theoretical works on intertextuality, scholarship on Afropolitanism and African diaspora writing, and critical essays on each novel (Kristeva; Allen; Kehinde; Bordin; Mavengano; Evans).

Analytically, the article focuses on passages where the presence of other texts or discourses is most visible or structurally significant. These include scenes in which television news, charity campaigns and foreign visitors appear; moments where biblical stories, proverbs and songs are invoked; sequences where the form of the novel shifts into lists, incantations or interior monologue; and patterns that echo canonical African narratives of family and nation. The analysis treats these elements as intertextual, whether or not they are explicitly signposted as quotations. The method is comparative and dialogic: rather than dealing with each novel in isolation, the reading moves back and forth between *Ghana Must Go* and *We Need New Names* to trace convergences and divergences in their intertextual practices. This approach allows us to see how Bulawayo's child-centred narrative and Selasi's multi-voiced family saga collectively map and contest similar archives of African representation.

Synopsis of *Ghana Must Go* and *We Need New Names*

Ghana Must Go tells the story of the Sai family across several decades and hemispheres. Kweku Sai, a gifted Ghanaian surgeon, emigrates to the United States, marries Fola, a Nigerian woman from a politically engaged Lagos family, and has four children. After he is scapegoated in a malpractice case and loses his position, Kweku abandons his family and returns alone to Ghana, where he dies of a heart attack in his garden (Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*). The novel is structured around this death and the journey of Fola and the adult children back to Ghana for the funeral. Through non-linear chapters that shift focalisation, the narrative reconstructs Kweku's humiliation, Fola's sacrifices and exile, Olu's and the twins' experiences of racism and class aspiration in the United States, and the complex mix of anger and longing that marks the family's return.

We Need New Names follows Darling, a ten-year-old girl living in Paradise, a Zimbabwean shantytown marked by hunger, political violence and economic collapse (Bulawayo). The early chapters present episodic adventures with her friends Bastard, Chipso, Godknows, Sbhoo and Stina: stealing guavas in the affluent neighbourhood of Budapest, witnessing forced evictions and beatings, and encountering foreign visitors who photograph and film their lives. Halfway through the novel, Darling migrates to America to live with her aunt in "Destroyedmichigan." The narrative then portrays her adolescence as an undocumented immigrant: struggles at school, the strain of supporting family back

home, fragmentation of childhood friendships and exposure to US media representations of Zimbabwean suffering.

In both novels, the protagonists move between African and Western spaces, and their stories unfold at the intersection of intimate family dynamics and broader political-economic forces. Each text also foregrounds the act of looking, being looked at, looking back, and learning to see one's own life through others' narratives which is crucial for understanding their intertextuality.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework combines Kristeva's concept of intertextuality with Kehinde's Africanist extension of the term and with insights from debates on Afropolitanism. Intertextuality is understood here, following Kristeva and Allen, as the condition of textuality itself: every text is woven from existing discourses and genres, and meaning arises from the encounter between the text and the intertexts recognised by readers (Kristeva 37; Allen 1–5). Intertextuality includes explicit citations, such as named books or quoted lines, as well as implicit allusions to shared stories, conventional images and media formats.

Kehinde emphasises that in African fiction intertextuality often involves “writing back” to colonial texts, nationalist narratives and earlier postcolonial works, while also incorporating oral forms and communal memory (Kehinde 373–75). This means that intertextual analysis in African contexts must consider a broad range of sources, from mission-school Bible reading and post-independence political speeches to global charity campaigns and hip-hop lyrics.

Afropolitanism, meanwhile, functions in this article both as an object of representation and as an intertextual archive. Selasi's essay “Bye-Bye, Babar” and subsequent critical discussions circulate a set of images, African travellers in airports, Africans in designer clothes mixing languages, Africans who “refuse to oversimplify” the continent, that become a textual horizon for reading *Ghana Must Go* (Selasi, “Bye-Bye, Babar”; Skinner). When Selasi's novel presents highly educated Ghanaian and Nigerian characters living in Boston and Accra, it inevitably echoes and interrogates this Afropolitan script. Bulawayo's focus on children in a Zimbabwean shantytown and an undocumented teenager in the Midwest may appear far removed from Afropolitan glamour, yet her narrative continually brushes against global images of Africa that circulate in similar transnational spaces.

Analysis and Results

Read together, *Ghana Must Go* and *We Need New Names* reveal a shared intertextual strategy: they position their characters inside a dense lattice of inherited narratives, images and genres and then show those characters negotiating, mimicking or resisting these intertexts. In both novels, humanitarian and media representations of Africa are not merely external frames for Western readers; they are part of the lifeworld of African characters who learn, sometimes painfully, how

they are supposed to appear.

One of the most striking parallels lies in how both texts stage encounters with outsiders who arrive already armed with images of Africa. In *We Need New Names*, the children of Paradise live in scenes that recall widely circulated photographs and documentaries: makeshift houses, hungry bodies, political rallies turned violent (Bulawayo). Yet Bulawayo refuses the single authoritative viewpoint of those external lenses by focalising almost everything through Darling and her friends. When “NGO people” and journalists arrive with their equipment, the children instantly recognise the scripts at play; they cluster around, call out English words, and perform the very gestures of deprivation and exuberance that global audiences expect (Bulawayo). Their play is not simply complicity, however. As Edmore Mavengano notes, the children's “ironic re-enactments of media scripts” turn Paradise into a space where national dysfunction is both suffered and mocked (Mavengano 6–8). The children's speech is intertextual to its core, stitched together from Bible verses, school lessons, pop lyrics and fragments overheard from visitors. In this way, Bulawayo exposes humanitarian and media representations as recognisable genres that can be learned and parodied, not natural windows onto truth.

Ghana Must Go seems at first glance far removed from this world of cameras and spectacle, moving as it does among hospitals, universities and carefully landscaped homes in Boston and Accra (Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*). Yet Selasi's Sais are no less entangled in external narratives about Africa and Africanness. Kweku's career as a celebrated surgeon in the United States echoes stories of “exceptional” African professionals in Western institutions, while his subsequent dismissal as a scapegoat evokes a different archive: tales of racialised injustice and precarious black success in white-dominated spaces. These stories are never quoted directly, but the narrative's emphasis on Kweku's meticulous self-fashioning, in impeccably pressed shirts and polished shoes, signals an awareness of being watched and evaluated according to pre-existing expectations (Bordin). Fola's recollections of coups, student protests and economic decline in Lagos and Ghana summon the familiar chronicle of post-independence disillusionment that runs from Achebe through Aidoo to Adichie (Achebe; Aidoo; Adichie). In Selasi's hands, however, that chronicle is filtered through intimate family scenes rather than through didactic exposition. Intertextuality here works by condensation: a passing reference to “when the soldiers came” or “the Ghana must go bags” operates as shorthand for whole histories that informed readers will recognise (“No Place like Home” 47).

Intertextuality in both novels also operates through religious discourse. In *We Need New Names*, biblical stories and church songs circulate in Paradise alongside slogans picked up from foreign visitors and television. The children rename themselves Bastard, Godknows, Chipso and so on, creating a comic yet poignant onomastic system that draws on Christian, colonial and local naming practices at once (Bulawayo). When they play “country-game,” assigning each

other countries like Britain and America, they participate in a kind of parodic world-mapping that echoes school geography lessons and news maps of crisis zones (Mavengano 6–7). The effect is to show how global hierarchies are internalised at the level of children's play, with Africa repeatedly cast as a space one must escape.

Selasi's characters inhabit a different but related religious intertext. Fola's Nigerian background connects her to a world of military coups, pro-democracy activism and Christian rhetoric, while Kweku's Ghanaian childhood brings memories of rural spirituality and the Ghana Must Go expulsions that gave the novel its title. Although explicit religious scenes are few, the Sais' family stories are structured by narrative patterns recognisable from both Christian and African oral traditions: tales of exile and return, prodigal children, sacrificial mothers and patriarchs whose flaws doom the household (Aidoo; Achebe). The novel's recurrent references to doors opening and closing, to shoes by the threshold, and to journeys undertaken too late call to mind biblical and folkloric motifs of passage, repentance and missed opportunity.

A further dimension of the intertextual relationship between the two novels lies in their shared attention to acts of viewing and being viewed. In Bulawayo's text, this is most obvious when visitors film Paradise and when Darling later watches images of Zimbabwe on American television. In Selasi's, the gaze is more interiorised: characters continually imagine how they appear to others—white colleagues, Ghanaian relatives, partners who do not share their histories. Each novel thus stages what might be called “meta-scenes” of representation, in which the characters encounter external narratives about people like themselves and must decide how to align with or diverge from them. These are, in effect, intertextual encounters within the story-world: the protagonists come face to face with the texts and images that already claim to speak for them. The novels respond by overlaying those external accounts with their own complex, sometimes contradictory stories, thereby asserting narrative agency.

The most sustained intertextual work, however, occurs in the way both novels engage with the African family saga and migration narrative. *Ghana Must Go* clearly writes into a tradition of African novels that track families across historical upheavals, from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to Aidoo's *Changes* and Adichie's *Americanah* (Achebe; Aidoo; Adichie). Yet Selasi's narrative form—its looping, associative structure, the use of free indirect discourse and interior monologues—also echoes modernist experiments with time and consciousness. By weaving these influences together, the novel positions the Sai family simultaneously within African genealogies of colonial disruption and within more global literary conversations about the fractured modern family.

Similarly, *We Need New Names* resonates with earlier African and diasporic bildungsromans in which young protagonists confront political change and negotiate education and migration, such as Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* (Dangarembga). Bulawayo's use of a child's voice, however, introduces a distinctive intertextual dimension. The child narrator has a long history

in writing about war, poverty and racial injustice, often serving as a means of combining innocence with witness. Bulawayo adapts this device to Zimbabwean crisis and US immigration, while deliberately exposing its limits: Darling is perceptive but not omniscient, and her partial understanding of events becomes a commentary on how outsiders themselves partly understand or misunderstand African situations.

In both novels, intertextuality thus underpins a complex negotiation of Afropolitanism. Selasi offers characters whose lives exemplify the mobility and cultural hybridity celebrated in Afropolitan discourse, yet the novel is haunted by what that discourse often leaves out: the costs of professional humiliation, the silence around childhood abuse, the class and passport inequalities that separate the Sai siblings from cousins and compatriots in Ghana and Nigeria (Bordin). *We Need New Names*, by contrast, begins among those who are structurally excluded from Afropolitan privilege but whose images nevertheless circulate in the same global spaces where Afropolitan branding operates. Darling and her friends consume American pop culture, know the names of faraway cities and dream of leaving, but their eventual migration to the United States unfolds in cramped apartments and service work rather than in the glamorous spaces of Afropolitan fantasy.

Crucially, both texts stage moments in which their protagonists confront representations of Africa circulating in Western media. Darling sees images of Zimbabwe on television in America, narrated by distant newsreaders; Olu and the others encounter stereotypical understandings of Africa among their classmates and partners. These moments are intertextual encounters in the most literal sense: the characters watch themselves, or people like them, being turned into stories by others. The novels respond by layering their own narratives over those images, offering alternative framings that foreground complexity and ambivalence.

Discussion of Findings

The comparative intertextual reading undertaken here suggests several key findings. First, *Ghana Must Go* and *We Need New Names* jointly reconfigure Africa–diaspora relations by refusing to treat Africa as a static point of origin and the West as a final destination. Instead, they present Africa and the West as mutually implicated spaces linked by long histories of movement, representation and unequal exchange. Intertextual references to coups, expulsions, economic decline and political violence in Ghana, Nigeria and Zimbabwe are juxtaposed with images of American suburbs, universities and housing estates, exposing continuities of vulnerability and aspiration across these sites.

Second, both novels critique humanitarian and Afropolitan discourses from within, by incorporating their vocabularies and imagery into the texture of everyday life. Bulawayo's children learn to speak the language of foreign visitors and televised appeals, but they also twist it into satire and song. Selasi's Sais embodies Afropolitan success yet carry within their family story the scars of racism, professional scapegoating and sexual violence. Intertextuality, in both

cases, functions as a critical mirror: by echoing and re-voicing external narratives about Africa and Africans, the novels make visible the assumptions and omissions embedded in those narratives. This corroborates Kehinde's insight that intertextuality in African fiction can be a mode of cultural and political critique (Kehinde 375–76).

Third, the analysis shows that intertextuality in these texts extends beyond written literary texts to include visual, sonic and embodied codes. Charity imagery, news bulletins, pop songs, school essays and family anecdotes all operate as intertexts. Children in Paradise interpret their environment through snatches of songs and catchphrases picked up from television and passers-by; the Sai siblings interpret their lives through the stories their parents tell about Ghana and Nigeria, as well as through Western narratives of meritocracy and success. These non-literary intertexts are crucial for understanding how contemporary African fiction responds to a world in which images of Africa are constantly produced, circulated and consumed. The novels' attention to how people internalise and resist these images adds an important dimension to intertextuality theory, which has often foregrounded written canons.

Conclusion

This article has argued that *Ghana Must Go* and *We Need New Names* construct Africa and its diasporas through dense intertextual mosaics that draw on oral traditions, African literary canons, religious language, humanitarian and media discourse, as well as Afropolitan self-fashioning. Using Kristevan intertextuality and Africanist extensions of the concept, the analysis has shown that intertextuality is not merely a decorative conception critical abalytic approach to texts, but deeply implicated in how the texts in context imagine family, childhood, home and movement. Selasi's narrative of the Sai family reworks the African family saga and modernist interiority to produce an Afropolitan story that is constantly haunted by experiences that Afropolitan discourse tends to gloss over. Bulawayo's account of Darling's journey from Paradise to “Destroyedmichygan” appropriates and unsettles charitable and media images of African suffering, while situating Zimbabwean crisis within a global economy of desire and disappointment. Read together, the novels complicate celebratory visions of cosmopolitan mobility and sentimental scripts of African disaster by insisting on the uneven, contradictory textures of diasporic life.

Also, ultimately, *Ghana Must Go* and *We Need New Names* exemplify how African writers are re-narrating the continent and its diasporas not by standing outside global narratives but by inhabiting them critically, bending them to suit local rhythms towards inserting other voices into their cultural mainstreams. Their characters read and are read by the world; their stories move alongside photographs, headlines and essays about Africa. these currents serve the purpose of linking different narratives thus sharpening understanding of how African literature intervenes powerfully in the global dialogues concerning the directions to the future.

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