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# The Flight's Lost Moment.

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**ABSTRACT:** The failure of post-war institutions to fully grasp the depth and permanence of the placeless condition in the twentieth-century is at least in part responsible for the re-emergence of camps, barbed wire, sunken boats, and separated children in our own. As Seyla Benhabib demonstrates brilliantly, none of key intellectual exiles at the center of her book believed that political thought could simply accommodate the age of the refugee: the terms under which it operated had to shift with the moving world. I argue that there is an important kind of border poetics at work in these accounts of exile, migration and statelessness and within Benhabib's analysis of the challenges that the placeless condition presents to the institutions of law and democracy today. This is no-coincidence. The modern history of placelessness required—and requires—a political imagination, and a language, that we are yet to fully appreciate or articulate. The wager of Benhabib's book is how we might cultivate a poetics of exile which relinquishes claims to sweeping universalism whilst imagining the new forms we so urgently need to keep political life open to the differences and otherness that is its lifeblood.

**KEYWORDS:** exile, migration, statelessness, the placeless condition, poetics, poetry, borderline.

**IT IS THE MOMENT OF FLIGHT ITSELF THAT IS OFTEN THE MOST DIFFICULT TO GRASP.**

In January 1961, Robert Lowell sent Hannah Arendt his “almost unrecognizable” translation of Rilke's *Taube, die draußen blieb*, re-titled “Pigeons: (For Hannah Arendt).” Lowell's first stanza reads:

The same old flights, the same old homecomings,  
dozens of each per day,  
but at l[e]ast the pigeon gets clear of the pigeon-house. . .  
What is home, but a feeling of homesickness  
for the flight's lost moment of fluttering terror?<sup>1</sup>

Rilke's dove who dared venture out in the first part of the twentieth century (his original was published in 1926), by the 1960s had become a pigeon pushing her way through the world-wide commute which ever since, at least until Coronavirus temporarily stilled the airports, has marked the daily life of an increasingly mobile and interdependent world. In such a world, it is no longer the pigeon-house one feels homesick for, but the moment of flight, the instant you're lifted from the ground, neither in one place or another, between times and places. It is a moment of terror, certainly; the violent flapping of panicked wings often makes it difficult to see what is happening clearly. But if we feel homesick for the moment of flight now, this is because it is also a moment of possibility, of beginning, of a future to come.

The thinkers at the center of Seyla Benhabib's remarkable study lived the moment of flight intensely. Migrants, exiles, refugees, stateless persons, all survived the years during which the estrangement from the world that characterized modernity was literalized in the enforced displacement and genocide of Europe's Jews. Their collective gift was to refuse to leave that experience behind, or to cover up the "calamity" as Arendt frequently described it, that made exile, rootlessness, and human superfluity, the everyday dark background of modern existence. The question they raised, in different ways, is also a challenge to our own time: what kind of thinking can make a home for the experience of flight itself?

The failure of post-war institutions to fully grasp the depth and permanence of the placeless condition in the twentieth-century is at least in part responsible for the re-emergence of camps, barbed wire, sunken boats, and separated children in our own. As Benhabib demonstrates brilliantly, none of these thinkers believed that political thought could simply accommodate the age of the refugee: the terms under which it operated had to shift with the moving world. Nobody perhaps, Arendt once observed in a letter to Heinrich Blücher, "is better at marking the border of a terrain than the per-

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Lowell, "Pigeons (For Hannah Arendt)," *Imitations* (London: Faber, 1962), 149. In the draft he sent to Arendt, Lowell wrote that "at least the pigeon gets clear of the pigeon house," which he amends to "at last" in the published version, turning the original dry bathos, into a possibly more Rilkean pathos.

son who walks around it from the outside.”<sup>2</sup> Benhabib’s exiles, the eternal “half-others,” inner and outer emigrants, all thought about the domain of politics from its borders; as Jews, as strangers in new lands and, importantly for this book, as persons who had been made to feel strange in lands they once thought of as their homes.

If I open my response with Lowell’s poem this is not only because my own path to this chapter of critical theory was through literature and literary criticism, but because I think that there is an important kind of border poetics at work in this estrangement too, both within the texts of several of the key thinkers whose work Benhabib elucidates, and also within her own thinking and writing. This is no-coincidence. The modern history of placelessness required—and requires—a political imagination, and a language, that we are yet to fully appreciate or articulate.

Seyla Benhabib’s acute conceptual clarity has long guided a generation of political and social scientists through the most challenging texts of twentieth-century critical theory. She is a border thinker who respects the capacity of forms to shape and contain political life. “Can we, really, do without formalisms?” she asks (85). The answer is nearly always a qualified no: we need norms, institutions, laws, rights, tables that we can get around. *Democratic iterations* and *jurisgenerativity* and are the two principles through which she has accounted for the political movement necessary to re-negotiate belonging in an age of flight. That she has less to say here about democratic iterations than in previous studies reflects the world-wide assault on democratic institutions over the past five years; that forms of law, particularly international human rights law, are also struggling to maintain the cultural and political authority to check, for example, the outsourcing of border security—including illegal pushbacks and *refoulement*—speaks to how locked down our political institutions have lately become. The forms are in trouble; their movements seem arrested.

Yet the conceptual displacements Benhabib describes in this book, like the historical and biographical ones that shadow them, not only push at political forms but at language and thought too. “Thinking dwells in the language of metaphors and tries to bridge the gap between the visible and invisible realms,” she writes, echoing Arendt’s re-iteration of Heidegger’s poetics in *The Life of the Mind* (1971, 56). Thinking dissolves the meanings that have become attached to the metaphors by which we organize the political world. When we start to really think about the meaning of words,

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<sup>2</sup>Hannah Arendt to Heinrich Blücher, March 8, 1955, Berkeley, *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, 1936–1968*, ed. with introduction by Lotte Kohler, trans. Peter Constantine (New York: Harcourt, 1996), 17.

Arendt wrote in *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, “nothing stays put anymore, everything begins to move.”<sup>3</sup>

This is especially, possibly uniquely, the case with the three key words that make up the book’s title: exile, statelessness, and migration; all three, again far from coincidentally, words that describe forms of human movement. “It is often noted that . . . certain explanatory paradigms win out over their rivals because of their simplicity and elegance,” Benhabib notes in her introduction to Albert Hirschman’s famous triad: exit, voice, and loyalty. While the clarity of the pair, “exit” and “voice,” allows us grasp the tensions between economic agency and political participation, it is “to Hirschman’s credit” that he complicated the binary with the more difficult, and less reliable, term that shuttles between them, “loyalty,” with all its affective, historical, and psychic load (145). Benhabib, by contrast, begins not with two, but three terms: each implicates and complicates the other, but no one can either fully explain, reconcile or sublimate (*Aufhebung*) the other two. It is to her credit in turn that she resists the temptation to resolve her triad into any kind of socio-political ontology. Rather, the intricate entwining of the three terms, and the gaps between them, raises important questions about how to think about borders, belonging and political life both across the centuries (from the twentieth century to the present) and across forms and disciplines.

Exile is the oldest of the three, the most literary and the most conceptually mobile. As an idea and a trope, exile has always overreached the generally miserable condition that it is. From Homer to the modern novel, there have been those forced out of their communities, lost and cursed, and those who make a mind of exile—writers, philosophers, psychoanalysts, and artists. The universalizing claims of exile have often overwhelmed the particularity of the condition itself, as the literary critic Claudio Guillén (himself a child refugee) noted as did, more critically, Edward Said.<sup>4</sup> Migration, also ancient, belongs to the lexicon and history of political economy, in which the movement of people is understood as driven by, and frequently subsumed by, that of capital and labour. Benhabib quietly replaces Hirschman’s “exit,” an act of economic and social agency, with exile in her thematic cluster: exile, voice, loyalty. It is a critical and creative displacement. What happens to such agency when you have been forced out of your home and denied new a new one? In Benhabib’s words: “What kind of moral and political agency can we attribute to human beings who have lost their place in the world?” (111).

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<sup>3</sup>Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations.” 1971. *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 171.

<sup>4</sup>Claudio Guillén, “On the Literature of Exile and Counter-Exile,” *Books Abroad* 50.2 (Spring 1976): 271–280; Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile” (1984), *Reflections on Exile* (London: Granta, 2001), 173–186. See my discussion of the literature of exile and statelessness, “Reading Statelessness: Arendt’s Kafka,” *Placeless People: Rights, Writing, and Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 29–45.

It is statelessness, the historical newcomer in her triad, that gave these question their particular urgency for the mid-century Jewish thinkers in this book. Statelessness, as described Mira L. Siegelberg in her excellent recent history, was a fictional idea that became both a grim reality and an unusually innovative legal category in the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> As empires shifted, wars and revolutions were declared, and borders drawn and redrawn, those without a nation-state, like refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers today, came to represent a challenge and a question for definitions of political life. For some, the response was (as now) to bolt down definitions of political citizenship more tightly still to the national territorial state; for others the provocation was to imagine the possibility of political and legal citizenship beyond the state. The “Jewish Problem,” as all the thinkers in this book understood through usually bitter experience, was in reality also the nation state problem. “In the German-Jewish encounter with political modernity the contradictory presuppositions constitutive of every nation-state are revealed,” Benhabib argues (20).

Statelessness, then, was the political, historical, and legal condition of this encounter; exile its existential, ethical, and sometimes theological condition, and migration, with its complex and compromised promise of movement and agency, a possible exit. The rapid criminalization of migration by powerful and rich states over the past few years demonstrates the extent to which the right to flight is now the privilege of the wealthy. It also shows how the tired binary—nation state or abject statelessness—still exercises a potent ideological hold for waning states attempting to prop up their power. There has been, we might say, a kind of anti-poetics at work in the early twenty-first century; shoring up borders, preventing both the transfer of people and the transfer of meaning that comes when language and thought are permitted to flap their wings.

It is this freezing of thought that the mobile thinking in Benhabib’s book helps us crack through. Arendt’s analysis of how the condition of statelessness exposed “the existence of a right to have rights” is crucial here, as it is throughout Benhabib’s work.<sup>6</sup> The question of how to safeguard the right to have rights, to ensure that all can speak and appear, be moral and political agents in a moving world remains the great perplexity of our times. It is in part, of course, a question of political forms: if not the nation state then what? If the post-war human rights regime, despite its many innovations, can no longer stay the hands of tribal nationalism and neofascism then what can? If all human movement is now primarily economics, what of the

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<sup>5</sup>Mira L. Siegelberg, *Statelessness: A Modern History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

<sup>6</sup>Hannah Arendt *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, ©1951, 2004), 376.

right to exit? What happens when the climate emergency reveals the ‘contradictory presuppositions constitutive’ not just of every nation-state, but of capitalism and democracy too?

The challenge of these questions takes us back to the imperative to grasp the moment of flight. Whilst acknowledging the contradictions in Arendt’s thought, Benhabib keeps faith with potential radicality of the right to have rights and, in particular, of the “the abyss of freedom and the unexpected and contingent dimensions of the political in Arendt’s work (107).<sup>7</sup> The ‘indeterminacy of new beginnings’” she concludes, cannot be avoided any more than the “tragedy of the political” which can turn the best emancipatory political innovations into forms of oppression (the path running from the EU to Frontex, in other words, is no reason to believe that interdependent co-operative polities might not be a good guarantee of future political life in Europe [191]). But thinking in an abyss, or sometimes simply pausing as our bodies leave the ground, is the hardest thing to do. Vertigo, as Freud once explained, is less a fear of heights, than the anxiety that occurs when the frames by which organize our perceptions of the world are disturbed.<sup>8</sup> We prefer to see a “migrant crisis” rather than a global placeless condition, for instance, or search for a border ‘solution’ rather confront the unsettling complexity of the borderlands.

In a crucial 1993 essay, “The Borders of Europe” (crucial not least because its themes anticipated so much of what was to follow) Étienne Balibar explained how western forms of political reason are ill-equipped to think about the realities of borders because European thought itself is so beholden to border thinking: to determining what is inside and outside, here and there, real and imagined, practical and abstract—who is a citizen and who other. Our thought is, at least since Kant, primarily categorical. If we’re to grasp the crises of borders, he argued, it is now necessary to “try and think what it is difficult to even imagine” about what lies between forms and categories; and nowhere more so than when it comes to questions of sovereignty

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<sup>7</sup>Many of the unexpected and contingent moments of the political in Arendt’s own work occur when she is at her most poetic, when her language takes risks, and her forms mutate in striking ways: the aphorisms, for example, that guide her between past and future in the preface to her essays of the same title; her close reading of the meanings of goodwill and the rights of the stranger in Kafka’s *The Castle*; her memories of how reciting Brecht on the refugee rat runs affirmed the right to belong to a human community of speakers and storytellers; the extraordinary formal modernism of the structure of *Origins of Totalitarianism*, and the stylistic minimalism of *The Human Condition*: each coinciding with moments of movement in her own life, as well as with key innovations in her thinking.

<sup>8</sup>Sigmund Freud, “Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety” (1926), *On psychopathology: “Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety,” and other works*, James Strachey 1887–1967; Angela Richards; Institute of Psycho-analysis (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

and belonging. As the psychoanalyst André Green wrote, we can “be” a citizen or refugee, a national or an *apatride*, “but to *be* borderline” is “difficult to imagine.” But is this not “precisely what, all around us, many individuals, groups, and territories must indeed try to imagine . . . what most intimately affects their ‘being’ insofar as it is neither this nor that?” Balibar asks.<sup>9</sup>

Since Balibar’s essay, borderline persons and territories, camps, settlements, migrant communities, enclaves, exclaves, transnational movements, virtual communities have proliferated, both on the borders but also increasingly within states. As Benhabib prudently argues, these are hardly places where the forms necessary to political agency are easily available; but neither are they agentless. In such places, what the universal jurisdiction of human rights now means is actively contested, and sometimes generated, in both enactments and direct claims to the right to have rights. A new generation of exiles and migrants are stepping forward to describe not just what the political domain looks like when seen from the outside, as did a previous generation, but what it means to live and think on that border—to live between categories. From Beirut to West London, Moira, Lesbos to the West Bank, there is an as yet “undisclosed poetics” of our contemporary borderlands that captures their complexity not only with a greater imagination, but sometimes too with greater accuracy than can social and political science alone.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, there have always been alternative political organizations to the nation state; city-states, federations, commonwealths, councils, republics, etc, and different ideas about how we might live in them. An anti-colonial poetics drove the political imagination to new ideas about self-determination, democracy, belonging and accountability at very moment that the post-war world order was busy re-inventing the territorial nation state as its basic political and legal unit. When it comes the poetry of the future, especially in Marx’s sense of a creative *poesis* that puts something politically new into the world, Aimée Césaire, Léopold Senghor, Albert Memmi were as much Arendt’s contemporaries as Emmanuel Levinas and Walter Ben-

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<sup>9</sup>Étienne Balibar, “The Borders of Europe,” trans. J. Swenson, in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 217; André Green, “La concept de limite,” *La folie privée: psychanalyse des cas-limites* (Paris: Gaillimard, 1990), translated as “The Borderline Concept,” *On Private Madness* (London: Rebus Press, 1996). I discuss the poetics of the borderline more fully in “Statelessness and the Poetry of the Borderline: W. H. Auden and Yousif M. Qasmiyeh,” *Placeless People*, 166–185.

<sup>10</sup>For discussion of the “undisclosed poetics of care” in refugee hosting communities in Lebanon and Jordan see Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, “The Poetics of Undisclosed Care,” *Refugee Hosts*. Accessed 12 February 2021. <https://refugeehosts.org/2019/05/21/the-poetics-of-undisclosed-care/>.



jamin.<sup>11</sup> Her failure to recognize them as such is partly responsible for the impoverished grasp of the contemporary meanings of rights, placelessness and political belonging in Anglo-European thought.

This poetics matters too, I think, because right now we seem further away than ever from realizing a world where the reflective judgment and enlarged mentality Benhabib recommends, again after Arendt, necessary to the right-to-have-rights can be practised. Benhabib holds out, beautifully, for a politics of “negotiable in-betweeness, through which I come to respect you as my equal, as the bearer of shared universal human dignity, all the while knowing you to be a concrete other, with an irreducibly different history, body, needs, and memory than mine” (32). But Kant’s mentality, however enlarged, like Arendt’s when it came race, has its borders and blind-spots, the places where it cannot, or will not, go. The wager of her book is how we might cultivate a poetics of exile which relinquishes the claims to sweeping universalism whilst imagining the new forms we so urgently need to keep political life open to the differences and otherness that is its lifeblood.

Writing her own “translation” of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, the young Arendt (with her first husband, Günther Stern) noted that in contrast to other forms of homelessness in history, the estrangement in his poetry was not “originally determined as transcendence,” but was “rather characterized by the detour it makes.”<sup>12</sup> Benhabib gives a stunning account of the route that detour took through the minds of some of the twentieth-century’s most creative and tenacious survivors. In so doing, she reminds us that we are still very much in the moment of flight.

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<sup>11</sup>See Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>12</sup>Hannah Arendt and Günther Stern, “Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*,” *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. by Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 6.