

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

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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.

## References

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