The news that European Union countries could deny visas to Africans, the majority (90 per cent of those vaccinated) who have received the Covishield vaccine produced by the Serum Institute in India has once again highlighted how disadvantaged Africans are when it comes to travelling abroad. I don’t want to go into the intricacies of why the EU has made this decision, which you can read about here, but I would like us to explore what travelling abroad will mean for Africans during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Will vaccinations determine who can and cannot travel? Given that less than 2 per cent of the African population is currently fully vaccinated, will this mean that the majority of Africans wishing to travel abroad will have to wait at least a year or two before they can do so? And if Covishield is not approved by the EU, does this mean that those who like me received two doses of the vaccine will be permanently barred from entering Europe?

Believing that the pandemic would not negatively impact Africa was just wishful thinking. While the number of infections and fatalities have been low compared to other regions, the economic shock has been equally – if not more – devastating. Loss of incomes has already impoverished millions of Africans as lockdowns continue with new waves of the pandemic. Moreover, we are – and have always been – at the receiving end of decisions made in other continents (the decision to colonise Africa was taken in Berlin by European powers) – decisions that determine what Africans should or should not do. We are not allowed to make decisions on our own behalf. African countries, including
Kenya, for example, did not stop flights from Europe or North America – the epicentres of the pandemic in the first and second waves – but these regions were quick to stop flights from African countries. Nor did we impose “vaccine passports” on citizens of these regions that would allow them to gain entry into our countries. As one of my Twitter followers explained, this should not surprise us because it is the mighty dollar and the euro that determine how Africans treat those who control both currencies.

How could it be any other way? Citizens of African countries are subjected to the most stringent visa conditions for entry into Europe or North America. Those of us who have applied for a visa to a European country, the United States or Canada know how painful and humiliating the process can be. From providing mountains of documentation, including bank statements, to show that one is not a potential illegal immigrant, to bearing the cost of exorbitant non-refundable visa fees, the visa application process is designed to deter Africans from travelling to these countries. This has significantly diminished the travel experience of Africans.

In her book *Travelling While Black: Essays Inspired by a Life on the Move*, the Kenyan writer Nanjala Nyabola describes visas as “a cruel and unusual invention” and “a power play, a cash grab, and a half-assed invitation to enter but not belong”. Nyabola not only unravels the experiences of Africans travelling abroad and within the continent but also exposes the “insidious racisms that shape the politics of human mobility”. As she emphasises in her foreword, the book is not a travel memoir, but essays inspired by travel – a book that tells uncomfortable stories that make us think about why they make us uncomfortable. As she so eloquently puts it: “In this book I want to sit in the discomfort of being a black woman and having our intersectional pain ignored . . . I want to reflect on what it means to be at home, and to be un-homed.”

The book begins with her experiences as a humanitarian worker in Haiti, the first black republic and one of the world’s poorest countries, where she learned about “the cultural construction of race”. In a country where NGOs managed mostly by white people practically run the country, she questions why she had to bend and adapt to their whims. Why were the Haitians not running the show?

Much has been written about the inadequacies of aid to Haiti, also known as “Republic of NGOs” (more on this in my forthcoming book), but not quite with the insider-outsider perspective of Nyabola, a black humanitarian worker in a non-African black country where white foreigners have more say than the locals. She concludes that those claiming to help impoverished Haitians should do so not because they feel bad for them, but “because we want them to experience the same fullness of life that we ourselves aspire to”.

Many of the essays in the book focus on another type of traveller – the African refugee or migrant who risks all by making the perilous journey across the Mediterranean in the hopes of reaching Europe. She questions the absurd practice of placing refugees in camps where they are denied freedom of movement and are not allowed to earn an income or to work. Most refugees seeking asylum before the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees came into effect, she notes, were not crammed into camps. Jews seeking asylum in Europe and North America during World War II were allowed to integrate socially and economically into the societies that accepted them. Why and how did this change? And why are an increasing number of Africans and Asians entering Europe illegally when there are legal ways to do so? Well, says Nyabola, it’s because “legal and safe passage to Europe has disappeared, for all but a small sliver of the world’s population”.

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Travelling while black also proves to be a challenge in Asia. On a physically demanding hike on Mount Everest, Nyabola encountered “being raced” by her Nepali guide, who refused to attend to her even when she fell dangerously ill simply because she was black. How can people who themselves do not enjoy white privilege become racist? Is the racism of white people different from that of those who also experience white racism? Nyabola tries to explain the difference by making a distinction between “racism” and “being raced”, the latter a phenomenon that black Africans who visit Asian countries often experience. She explains:

I think there is a qualitative difference between racism and being raced. Racism, I think, is more sinister and deliberate. But being raced or racing other people is something that people do because they aren’t paying attention. It’s cultural laziness: we create all these shorthands that allow us to process difference. . . . They have raced me – decided, based on cultural generalisations, who they think I am – in order to process my presence; and, because of the way popular culture from the West especially projects and processes black women, a lot of that is negative.

She is equally critical of Africans who treat other Africans badly. Her discomfiting experiences in South Africa, where xenophobic attacks against Somalis, Zimbabweans and other Africans have been rising in recent years, are telling, and reflective of a country that has not completely disengaged from the clutches of apartheid. South Africa challenges her belief that Africans can be at home anywhere on the continent – a belief advocated by the leading Pan-Africanists of yesteryear who envisioned independence from colonial rule as the basis for building an inclusive Africa for all Africans. “The truth is that millions of Africans are foreigners and migrants in Africa, un-homed by power and abandoned to physical or structural violence,” she admits.

There are some uplifting chapters in the book that hold out the promise of Pan-Africanism, like her trip to Gorom Gorom in Burkina Faso where she observed “regal families undulating on their camels” and her foray into rural Botswana where she goes to trace the life of Bessie Head, the mixed-race South African writer who Nyabola admires deeply. As an outsider in both the white literary world and in Bostwana, Head suffered loneliness and rejection. The black American literary crowd in the United States had no time for an African woman writer. When she reached out to fellow African writers like Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Chinua Achebe, who were beginning to be recognised in the West as African literary giants, “their responses were curt and perfunctory”. The chapter on Bessie Head’s life will no doubt resonate with female African writers for whom the doors of big established publishing houses are permanently closed.

Nanjala Nyabola’s book does, however, open new worlds to African women travellers like her who are reflecting on how their race and gender have shaped their experiences of dislocation, exile, belonging and not belonging.

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