

## I<sup>st</sup> AMMODI Key Note address

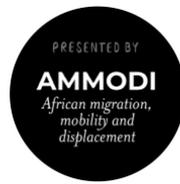
Nanjala Nyabola

17 June 2021

**[This is an edited transcript of the Key Note address, approved by Nanjala Nyabola]**

I like to think of myself as standing between multiple worlds. I have one foot in research, one foot in advocacy, one foot in policy work, one hand in policy work; another hand in building the things that I want to see in the world. I write books, I organise, I support campaigns, I make recommendations to governments and institutions and I start initiatives to build the things that I would like to see in the world. If you ask me, I would tell you that I have absolutely no interest in being an expert in anything. My goal is to cultivate an intellectual practice. And an intellectual practice that is fuelled by creativity, that is nursed by care and by love, that is driven by a desire to make life better for communities around the world. I am a person who is trying to do her part to understand the world so we can all work together in order to make it better. I am honoured to be here today delivering this inaugural keynote because it allows me to bring together some of my disparate interests before an audience that I think will share them. I love working and thinking outside disciplinary silos and my understanding is that you have gathered a group of people who are interested in the same. I am hoping that what I say resonates and adds something to what you are already doing. And notably I want to share some of my thoughts on human mobility in Africa to invite a return to a more humane approach to understanding and responding to the various challenges of human mobility around the world.

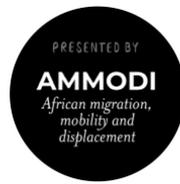
From the outside, I know that the diversity of my interests can seem confusing. It is confusing for me sometimes as well! In addition to this talk, this week I've been on panel conversations about technology and politics, about social organization, social contracts and about elections. But in my mind all of these things are united by a curiosity about what it would take to make



the world a better place and a more just place. My first book [[Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Kenya](#), Zed Books 2018] used technology to think about what it means to live in a society in a digital age. And my second solo book [[Travelling While Black. Essays inspired by a life on the move](#), Hurst Publishers 2020] uses travel as an entry point for thinking about the injustices and indeed the racism that is increasingly woven into how human beings are allowed to move. The common thread is thinking and working with people who are trying to build a just world and I will be borrowing from both poles of work for my conversation today.

I want to begin with an essay that features in my latest book, *Traveling While Black*. This collection of essays wasn't really premised as an academic collection at all, although I am happy that people in academia are finding useful things in there to talk and think about. It was really premised as a conversation, especially a conversation between African women, about travel, mobility, justice, identity and personhood. Because these are things that I'm hoping to think a little deeper about over the next few years. And I want to begin my talk today with one of the essays in the collection that was hardest to write but illustrates some of the points that are worth making in this conversation about human mobility today.

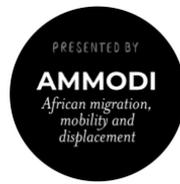
In 1937, in a sanatorium in Pietermaritzburg in South Africa, a young girl was born to a white mother and an unknown black father. Her family had the mother committed because under the apartheid regime interracial sexual relations were not only criminalised but also stigmatised as a form of mental ill health. The child would be taken from the mother and raised by Catholic nuns in an environment that was so strict that it cured her of all religion. She would go on to be a teacher and hate that too, leading her to journalism. With it she hoped she would write stories, human stories that illustrated the cruelty of the apartheid system. She would attempt to join the resistance to apartheid but a sexual assault, allegedly by one of the leaders of the movement she joined, would sour her on political action. Her home would be raided by apartheid police and indeed eventually demolished as part of the expansion of white settlement in Cape Town. She was punished for her work and political action and eventually tormented by the violent rejection of her country of birth she would flee into neighbouring Botswana under the exit pass system. Now for those of you who don't know, the exit pass system was



a cruel and inhumane process that would deprive black South Africans, but really anybody who opposed apartheid, of their citizenship allowing them to leave the country and to leave the structures of apartheid on condition that they forfeit their South African citizenship and never return. This young woman would go on and become Botswana's best-known writer, one of the leading lights of African literature. Today her work is taught around the world as an example of women's writing under apartheid but her timeless writing is really a beacon for anyone who wants to write about daily life with heart and with depth of feeling. She was a magician at the typewriter who built worlds that invited you in, held you close and moved you in ways that you did not think were possible.

Bessie Amelia Head was a refugee. Unwanted by her home country, she went to Botswana seeking normalcy, safety, a better life. But while she was no longer subjected to the excesses of the apartheid regime, she did not have the privileges of citizenship. Every Monday, 52 weeks a year, for 15 years she had to report to the local police station to make sure that she had not run away. She struggled to get travel documents to allow her to attend gatherings that so many of us take for granted. Today her work is celebrated all over Botswana, angry at the world that devoured her art but refused her the fullness of her identity. I wrote about Bessie Head in *Traveling While Black* because I wanted to put a human face to the cliché that sums up the tremendous human waste that the current refugee and migration policy framework produces. It is not that refugees have to be exceptional in order to deserve our empathy and our protection. Rather, the blanket choice to deny empathy and protection of refugees robs the world of unknown and yet unmeasured opinions and talents; a refugee who is languishing in a refugee camp in Kenya. The two scientists that discovered the technology that gave us the Pfizer/Biontech vaccine are both Turkish immigrants to Germany. What if the mind that would unlock the puzzles of the Coronavirus drowned in a dinghy in the Mediterranean Sea? What if the person who has the ideas that will make this world more just and fair is currently wasting away in an offshore detention site while politicians use their bodies to score political points?

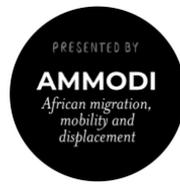
I think a lot about how I would never have been able to write about Bessie Head the way that I did in *Traveling While Black* with the depth of feeling and the rawness that I poured into that essay, if I had remained in the academy. I would have been forced to shape the essay differently



because the idea of feeling is increasingly antithetical to the world of ideas. We are becoming societies that are only inhabiting a fraction of what it means to be human because we worship at the altar of pure rationality, at the expense of the softer aspects of our existence. People are not only people because of their capacity for reason but also because of their capacity to hold complex emotions beyond what they need to survive. I think that sometimes when you do policy or academic work, you lose sight of the human aspects of what we are doing and why. And I think in the domain of refugee and migrant protection especially, this inability to hold both reason and emotion together is making it harder for us to tell the true and complete story of the world that we are building.

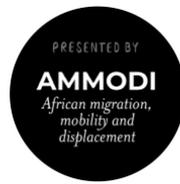
*Traveling While Black* also takes the reader to the Mediterranean Sea. In June 2021 UNHCR and IOM issued a joined statement, expressing alarm at the participation of European ships in the return of 270 refugees and migrants to the Libyan coast guard after their boats were intercepted in the Mediterranean Sea. Just 270. According to their statement, Libya cannot be considered a safe space. Refugees and migrants return to Libya as subjected to cruel and inhumane treatment, including rape, torture and even slavery. To date, the Libyan coastguard has returned 13000 people in Libya in 2021 alone. More than in any other year in history. And hundreds have died anonymous deaths in the open water. But the European Union through its border agency Frontex has made these returns a central pillar of European immigration policy.

In *Traveling While Black* I wrote about my experience of witnessing the arrival of a ship that had rescued some African people whose sinking boats had been intercepted in the Mediterranean Sea. On the docks in Palermo, I watched as a cargo ship inched towards the edge of the water before offloading the people. Slowly a dark blot in the horizon starts to take on a more concrete form as it inches closer and closer to the dock. A distant speck that turns into the largest boat that I have ever seen in my entire life. Probably two or three stories high from top to bottom. I crane my neck to see the hundreds of weary faces leaning over the railing, looking warily down at us probably wondering what would come next. As I write in the book, my first and dominant thought when I watched this sombre procession was, 'they look like slaves'. The scene reminded me of all the paintings and drawings and artistic re-



imaginings of the slave body that I had seen in museums across the West African Slave Coast. In Benin, in Ghana, in Senegal. But also in the South of the US and in Haiti. Black people suffering tremendous violence before finding themselves on boats. That first time, quote: “to provide the back-breaking labour that would build the prosperity that the West still profits from today.” And the second time, escaping the weight of life at the margins of the global, social and political system that we have built. Both of these threats united by the grave injustice of a world that puts profits over people. That scene in Palermo immediately made me think about how unnecessarily wasteful and iterative human life can be. We are determined to make the same mistakes over and over again, generation after generation, because we are determined not to learn. This sense of repetition and iteration is something that I also see in my work in technology and politics. Similar patterns of repeating the mistakes of the past. For example allowing private enterprise to make the rules that govern our political conversations or failing to control the influence of money in our political systems. We are repeating those mistakes again today. And when it comes to human mobility, we are once again in the situation where racism and fear of the other is being used to shape how we control human mobility, instead of beginning from a point of inclusion and providing safety. They say those who don’t learn from history are bound to repeat it and those who do learn from history are bound to watch others repeat it. History is replete with examples of how building high walls and returning people to violence didn’t generate safety but indeed compounded collective harm. I know this is Godwin’s law but the loss of life during the Holocaust would undoubtedly have been stemmed if countries would have opened their borders to refugees instead of returning them to harm. That is literally the reason why we have a modern refugee protection system. Because the last time the West turned people away, millions of people died unnecessary deaths. Similarly, the reason why the high seas are designated as a place of safety where boats have an obligation to help those who seek it is because in the past, allowing the high seas to become a place of anarchy made everyone on the open waters less safe. But here we are, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in a season of unprecedented plenty, turning people away.

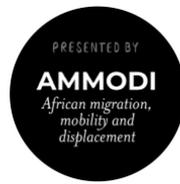
As I said, by June 2021 at least 13000 people have been returned to Libya where they face near certain torture and harm. According to Human Rights Watch, since 2013, Australia has



consigned 3000 people to uncertain detention in offshore sites that have let some to self-immolation in order to draw attention to their plight. And despite promises of ushering a reset in U.S. humanitarian policy, a pivot to a more humane system, the number of children detained at the U.S. border remains unconscionably high. And the Biden administration has waffled on its commitment to raise the number of refugees admitted into the U.S. And poor countries are beginning to read from the same script. The Kenyan government continues to routinely forcibly return of Somali refugees even though Somalia remains unsafe. Bangladesh has declared that it will no longer accept refugees from Myanmar. Countries in South America are looking at ways of denying Venezuelan migrants and refugees admission. The logic of exclusion before inclusion is becoming the dominant logic of safe practice.

At this stage, I could give you a long in-depth analysis of refugee and migration policy but I won't. Because you guys are the experts, you probably know this stuff better than I do. But also because this is a space that I am preparing to take a step back from and partly because as an African woman it has been a space in which it has been difficult to gain traction, to be able to have a platform, to speak with the complexity and the richness that I would like to be able to speak with. What I'm offering instead is the perspective of a person who tried out the tools of "objective analysis" and found them wanting. Of a person who tries to see the world not just as discrete points of intellectual entry but as a series of connected knowledge centres that tell a bigger story about what the world is moving towards.

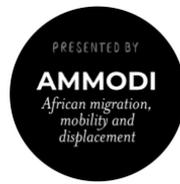
The problem as I see it is that even the people who are trying to argue against this access are using the logics, the arguments, and the language of this pure, raw rationality without feeling to try and make the case for inclusion. We are investing large sums of research money and effort into understanding economic justifications for accepting refugees for example. We are trying to use the language and logics of power to argue against the actions of power and I don't think it will work. Because some things are not about economics or the law, some things are just about morality and without the moral argument, we are making partial arguments that will always fall at the feet of power's interests. To quote Audrey Lorde: "The master's tools will never destroy the master's house."



In addition to the criticism of a policy that is deliberately harmful, that exposes people to untold harm, there is a normative dimension to the importance of arguing against the growing use of detention and forceful returns of refugees and migrants. It is difficult to make this normative argument and give it the treatment that it deserves because it doesn't neatly fit into the academic and policy analysis buckets that exist. It's not really philosophy, it's not really Political Science, it's not really Economics. Right and wrong no longer have a home, a natural academic home in the world that we are building. And the bottom line is this, it is immoral for the wealthiest countries in the world to make refugee protection solely the obligation of poor countries. It is immoral to sell the guns that cause the wars and then refuse to help those who escape them. It is wrong to sustain the political and economic conditions that make exit or migration the only option for millions of people around the world and then refuse to allow those people a measure of safety. It's just wrong. It's just immoral. And wrong in a way that cannot be debated using economic or legalistic arguments. Morality has become a difficult thing to write about in a day and age where feeling and sentiment are treated with contempt. We are told that good theory and policy appeals solely to the minds and that the rational is inherently superior to the emotive. Humanities and Social Sciences departments, the closest that we get to these kinds of conversations, are fighting for their lives so that instead of leading the charge to making us think clearly at a systems level about what we are doing to each other, we are stuck in a cycle of trying to feel with our heads.

This is probably the one advantage that I have from operating outside the university for so long. I can say things like this and not sound crazy and not worry about losing funding or losing grants or compromising my path to tenure. So let me say it again, this thing that we are doing where we are allowing refugees and migrants to die on the high seas or to languish in cages or to live indefinitely in open air prisons, it's just wrong. It's wasteful of human life. It's immoral.

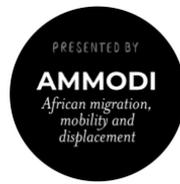
I have brought up two levels of arguments that are worth slowing down to emphasize. One concerns the way we think about knowledge and the other concerns what we hope to do about it. The idea of the superiority of reason without feeling is obviously a masculinist approach to what constitutes knowledge. It is a view of the world that bleaches it off the things that makes life worth living and pursuing. It short-changes all of us, flattening the depth of our



human experiences and robbing us of the key aspects, of the framework that we need to understand why some things should be spoken against. We are not just our thoughts. We are our feelings as well. We don't move through the world only as minds. We move through the world with our feelings and emotions as well. So the challenge for me as I was assembling *Traveling While Black* and with you here today is, how can we publicly and passionately make the case for protecting the humanity of refugees and migrants using both our hearts and our heads.

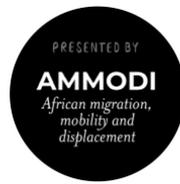
I think that to decolonize the way we think about refugee protection and managing human mobility, we have to make room for and reintroduce feminist approaches to our epistemologies and our methodologies. Not that the feminist, or the feminine, is inherently concerned with the soft, but that the soft has equal value to the heart and to be feminist is to look beyond power to the interests and experiences of those who don't have power. And feeling is a big part of that. Feeling is just as important to the human experience as thinking and where feminist and decolonising approaches invite us to be more holistic in the way that we think and work, they make room for us to deal with and to process feelings. We have to make room for things that move us to the fullness of our human experience. This is what a decolonial and feminist method demands. If power is concerned with domination and subjugation, feminist and decolonial thought allows us to make room for the moral debate.

The second part of what I put on the table has to do with what we hope to do about it. I'm alarmed, as I think are many people in the world, that countries are increasingly normalising the practice of letting people die on the high seas, in cages, detained indefinitely because they happened to be seeking safety and opportunity. It's so strange that we're living in this moment where paradoxically they are telling us that it is the most prosperous time in human history, that there are more people who have been lifted out of poverty than ever before but where wealthy countries are being driven by a scarcity mind-set that is fuelling this wave of cruelty. They are making us believe that there just isn't enough of everything for all of us to at the very least be safe and healthy.



So, I worked in and around these issues for about 10 years and, as I said, I think I'm kind of on a farewell tour with this phase because it has just been impossible as an African to be in these conversations as an equal. The vagaries of academia are working against us, the dominance of European but also increasingly North American, Australian funding of research into refugee issues, I think skews the research agenda. We are using the language of power and we are hoping to get crumbs from the table. Instead of rightfully and vocally railing against the unjust system, we are accepting of it. We are so circumventing our own interests to stay afloat and ahead in a system that makes you wonder why would you want to be a part of it at all. And this takes me back to Bessie Head and why I wanted to have an essay about my favourite author in a book about human mobility, refugees and migration. The thing about Bessie Head's story that broke my heart the most was that at every turn, the suffering that was inflicted upon her was justified by some kind of bureaucratic language or bureaucratic action. Apartheid wasn't just a system of force. It was a system of bureaucratized force. It was a system that tried to give the appearance of civility or organization to the darkest urges to be cruel, to be violent, to be destructive. The exit permit system was perfectly legal but it wasn't just. It was immoral. And the cruelty and humiliation that she endured as a refugee, that ultimately may have killed her, was also perfectly legal. It was justified as necessary for controlling influxes of refugees, controlling their movements within Botswana. You can dress it up in the fanciest language of bureaucracy and government, but the fundamental truth is this: it was cruelty dressed up in bureaucratic language and largely unopposed by people at multiple levels because it was spoken and articulated using the language of power.

This is the invitation to action that I want to leave you with today. I was asked to come and give a keynote about decolonisation and power. And I think the easiest way to think about that is to leave you with the image of Bessie Head. You in this convening have, through your citizenship and institutions in which you do your work, the ear of many governments that are making the policies that are driving us into this season of unprecedented cruelty. You have more power than you realise to shape the arguments and the conversations that shape refugee and migration policy. And I want to leave you with an invitation to use that power in defence of Bessie Head rather than for the tacit endorsement of bureaucratized cruelty and injustice.



Hold that image of Bessie Head in your hearts, in your heads. Allow that depth of feeling for a mother unable to fully and completely share her gifts to the world because bureaucrats are using the experiences of people like her to score political points. Scared and alone in a foreign country, stripped of her citizenship because she refused to put her head down and make no trouble. Poor and unable to make the most of her immense talent because she wasn't a citizen, she didn't have the right papers. Making a brave and dangerous journey across an international border because, to borrow the words of Warsan Shire, "home became the mouth of a shark." Sickly and eventually dying far before her time because she was unable to stand to her full height. With that image in mind, what kind of arguments, intellectual practice and rationale, what kind of academic work do we see ourselves as being party to and being obligated to produce?

I think decolonisation begins with refusing to allow making ourselves intelligible to power be the sole motivation of our academic work. I think decolonisation begins with centering the interests of those who do not have power over those who do. I think decolonisation begins with asking and raising the uncomfortable questions about justice, fairness, and morality that would have protected people like Bessie Head from the worst of the systems that we build and that we are building. I think decolonisation begins with rejecting the methods and the interests of power and focusing on the fullness of our humanity including our feeling, our empathy and our need for justice; with all the knowledge that we hold in our heads and in our hearts, and with the image of millions of Bessie Heads all over the world right now walking towards safety, on boats, looking for an opportunity and safety. Decolonisation to me begins with putting our efforts and our work and our feeling at this service rather than at the service of power. Thank you.

*This first AMMODI Keynote address was transcribed by Maren Wilmes, and edited by Franzisca Zanker and Jesper Bjarnesen. The edited transcript was approved by Nanjala Nyabola.*

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