# *Buyel' ekhaya* (Go back home): Xenophobia against Black African Migrants during the Covid-19 Lockdown in South Africa

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**Abstract**

Following the countrywide Covid-19 lockdown that brought the South African economy to a standstill, the government rolled out cash-based food relief projects to provide relief to impoverished individuals and communities. Competition over scarce resources intensified the 'othering' of non-South Africans as protests broke out. Some South Africans demanded that the government needed to 'put South Africa first'. This paper examines how the outbreak of Covid-19 provides a historical conjuncture that brings together multiple forms of racialization (including racialization, post-apartheid nationalism and xenophobia). I explore the racialized margins of nationalism and citizenship that manifested during the pandemic and relate them to the racialization of black South Africans in apartheid South Africa. I argue that the pandemic served as a crucible in which long-standing anti-immigrant state policies and sentiments by some subordinated populations found expression and legitimacy, leading to black migrants from specific African countries being targeted. I therefore propose an understanding of xenophobia against black African migrants in South Africa as a new form of racialization based not on phenotypical difference, but on the intersection of class, nationality and immigration status.

**Keywords:** xenophobia, migration, racialization, Covid-19, South Africa

> '*We want to put it on record that the government needs to be patriotic and ensure that companies that employ a huge [number] of South Africans be allowed to work. It is a big shame for the government to allow South African citizens to be excluded economically before, during and after the lockdown; this is the time for government to put South Africa first*.' (African Transformation Movement (ATM) President Vuyolwethu Zungula, 19 June 2020)

## Introduction

On 5 March 2020, South Africa's National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) confirmed its first case of Covid-19. The patient who tested positive for the virus was a white male who had just travelled from Italy. Through contact tracing and as more people tested positive, a narrative of Covid-19 as a rich man's and white people's disease started going round on social media. After all, the disease had reached the South African shores via 'air' (airplane), a mode of transport that is out of reach for the majority of South Africans. The association of the virus with migration, race and class was clear from the start. Just as HIV has long been framed as a poor man's disease spread by poor mostly male migrants, Covid-19 was being perceived as the rich migrant's disease. With the continued rise in positive cases in a racially skewed form, social media (mostly WhatsApp) were flooded with jokes, statements and short videos implying that poor black people were immune to the disease. However, as Covid-19 cases increasingly affected people across the board, it became clear that coronavirus was non-selective regarding race, class, or nationality. The


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discourse shifted from being racial to national in the form of xenophobia, as specific nationalities were singled out by anti-immigrant protestors as scapegoats and economic parasites warranting discrimination.

As highlighted in the opening statement, for the proponents of the 'Put South Africa First'[1] campaign, the pandemic apparently presented an opportunity for the South African government to put South Africans first. This followed and was followed by a series of online and street protests by mostly black South Africans calling for migrants and more specifically 'foreigners' to go back to their homes. According to the International Organization for Migration, a migrant is 'a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons (IOM n.d.). Based on this definition, however, it was evident that not all migrants were framed as foreigners and that the anti-immigrant protestors were not opposed to all foreigners in South Africa. Who, then, was considered a foreigner in South Africa during the pandemic? And what processes led to this categorization of some migrants as foreigners, for example, black Africans and others such as white Europeans as not foreigners? If Covid-19 was first thought of as a white disease, why did the subsequent xenophobic discourse and protests not include the whites as targets or foreigners? Like others in this Special Issue, I argue that, given the historical and current status quo undergirded by white supremacy, even though some South Africans still view whites and rich migrants as 'foreigners', they still feel powerless to target such categories of foreigners. This leaves poor black migrants as the only people to represent anything that is foreign. This observation is no doubt rooted in the global racial ideology (Iwata and Nomoto 2017), in which whiteness still retains symbolic capital despite the ending of apartheid.

[1] Founded by Mario Khumalo, a critic of the ANC (the South African ruling party).

The over-representation of black African migrants as targets of xenophobia in South Africa has resulted in some calling it Afrophobia (Matsinhe 2011). However, Afrophobia on its own cannot account for the violence against Asian migrants or explain why citizens from other African countries are not targeted (Landau 2011). Similarly, nationalism on its own cannot explain why white non-nationals are hardly ever targeted or why certain South African ethnic communities, such as the Venda and Tsonga, are also discriminated against (Neocosmos 2010). This calls for a nuanced understanding of the notions of difference and particularly the idea of the 'foreigner' within the complex historical and contemporary socio-economic and political fabric of South Africa. Based on the stories circulating in the media during the pandemic and the experiences of my migrant interlocutors before it broke out, I use two case studies to explore the idea of the 'foreigner' as a racialized term applied to black migrants from specific African countries. I also argue that the Covid-19 pandemic provided a conducive xenophobic climate characterized by uncertainty and fear and fuelled by long-standing exclusionary anti-immigrant discourses (Misago 2011, Zanker and Moyo 2021).

I situate my argument within the unique history of South Africa, focusing specifically on the Othering regime during apartheid and on post-apartheid nationalism in which racism played and still plays a critical role in the hierarchization of different people along racial and ethnic lines (Landau 2011). The current identification of certain groups of people as non-citizens, as implied in the opening quotation, and as less than human cannot be divorced from western racial ideology, which is premised on white supremacy (Mignolo 2011; Bonilla-Silva 2015; Lan 2019). This is noticeable in the term 'foreigner' as it is applied in the South African context and several other contexts within Africa, where white migrants are hardly seen as foreigners but rather as tourists, expats or just as investors coming to add value (Kunz 2020). On the other hand, black migrants are not only deemed foreign but are viewed as

parasites and called derogatory names. This article proposes an understanding of xenophobia against other African nationals by South Africans as a form of racialization based not on phenotypical differences, but on the intersections of class, nationality, immigration status and related ideas of foreignness.

In South Africa, xenophobia has been examined through the lenses of nationalism and globalization (Hickel 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009), with a few authors making associations with racism (Landau 2011). Racism has been largely framed by being premised on the black/white dichotomy or global south/north relations (Iwata and Nemoto 2018), shrouding seemingly non-racial practices and experiences that perpetuate racial inequalities of power (Bonilla-Silva 2015: 1369). In recent years, a significant number of studies have focused on the notions of race and racism outside the western hemisphere (Iwata and Nemoto 2018) and more specifically on south-to-south racial dynamics (Sautman and Yan 2016; Lan 2019) as mediated by both historical and contemporary political, social and economic contexts. Drawing on such studies, I examine how the current post-apartheid dilemmas around nativism, nationalism and related xenophobic sentiments and acts – more specifically Covid-19 induced – have roots in the binaries of settler (citizen) and native (foreigner) which were created during apartheid as a vehicle of racism. This is particularly important in South Africa, where the discourse on xenophobia has been side lined and silenced in scholarly, popular and political discourse, being overshadowed by more racial forms of discrimination and victimization such as those related to apartheid (Landau 2011).

Using the Covid-19 pandemic as a case study, I show how the victimization of black South Africans in apartheid South Africa is being replaced by the victimization of African foreigners in post-apartheid South Africa (Matsinhe 2011: 296). The pandemic is a relevant case study allowing us to understand xenophobia for a couple of reasons, one being the virus proving that 'we all are living beings with more or less the same biological needs' (Lorenzini 2020: s43), despite the inhumane treatment meted out to those who are identified as 'others'. It amplified the hierarchies between different human populations and provided a justification for the South African state to implement and reinforce restrictive measures on the mobility of migrants under the guise of a public health response (Vearey et al. 2021, Zanker and Moyo 2021). The disruptions that were brought about by the nationwide lockdown had economic repercussions on the already ailing economy and exacerbated the inequalities, thereby refuelling resentment towards migrants who were deemed undeserving of the cash-based relief assistance offered by the government. Furthermore, previous studies have established that contexts of social, economic and political uncertainty such as those triggered by the pandemic breed collective violence (Misago 2011). In what follows, I present my methodology, followed by my conceptual framework and two case studies. After presenting my findings, I will analyse the case studies, situating them within the historical colonial logic of racial differentiation by drawing parallels with the xenophobic sentiments expressed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Methodology**

This paper draws on a few specific social media posts on the WhatsApp group 'We are One' (a pseudonym), which was formed during the extended lockdown by South Africans and migrant activists against xenophobia. I joined this group on 21 June 2020 as a migration scholar and researcher after obtaining consent from the group administrator, who was the only one posting in the group. The group was formed as a communication channel to facilitate migrants' access to health facilities and information during the lockdown. With only twenty participants identified as the leaders of various migrant communities and organizations, the group's administrator took up the role of updating group members about the different measures introduced

by the government and highlighting how such measures affected migrants. Apart from updates around Covid-19, other updates included warnings about planned protests against migrants, as well as news of migrant experiences at South Africa's borders and in other parts of Africa. I also draw on ethnographic material gathered from June 2017 to February 2018 as part of an ongoing anthropological study on migration, masculinities and violence in Johannesburg inner city, which received ethical clearance from the Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Witwatersrand. During this study I spent a significant amount of time hanging out on street corners mostly with migrant men and a few women and children. I also followed the work of a few NGOs working in the area of gender equality, human rights and violence. I attended events such as workshops like the one I share in this paper. As a Zimbabwean woman myself the majority of my participants were from Zimbabwe, but others came from South Africa, Ghana, Malawi and Mozambique. Most of the workshop participants were unemployed or marginally employed migrants and South Africans. In the findings section I share an ethnographic vignette of a workshop on xenophobia revealing the racialization of some black African migrants before the pandemic. In the second case study, I explore the nationalist activists behind the social media campaign #PutSouthAfricaFirst. While these two case studies reflect a continuity in anti-migrant sentiment in South Africa, they also show the intensification and expansion of the racialization and social stigmatization of black migrants after the outbreak of Covid-19. Discourse analysis was conducted paying particular attention to the language and terms used in different contexts to refer to migrants. In what follows, I draw on the notions of nationalism and racism to situate the xenophobia rhetoric within the racialization discourse.

**Xenophobia, Nationalism and the Racialization of Migrants**

A significant body of scholarly literature has emerged exploring the many causes of xenophobia in South Africa, most of which pertain to political and economic factors born of globalization (Misago 2016; Hickel 2014). Several studies from the sociological and political science disciplines trace these xenophobic attacks back to the neoliberal polices and structural adjustments that have undermined livelihoods by spurring competition over limited resources such as jobs and housing (Hickel 2014). The effects of such a scenario are well documented, with several scholars agreeing – though not without opposition – that, in the face of diminishing resources, people use whatever social distinctions they may perceive they have to make claims on resources (Neocosmos 2008; Hickel 2014). The distinctions between foreigner and local are emphasized to justify entitlement to the limited resources through a process of racialization. Racialization has been defined as a socially constructed hierarchical categorization of people based on physical and cultural characteristics for the purposes of domination over them (Sautman and Yan 2016).

The racialization of migrants is embedded in their being conceived as a racial problem that needs to be addressed. Silverstein (2005) explores the genealogy of the various forms of racialization that migrants are subjected to across space and time, such as 'nomad, labourer, uprooted victim, hybrid and transmigrant' (376). Cross-cutting all these terms are the supposedly inherent problems associated with migrants, such as their being culturally different, immoral, primitive and disorderly, which would no doubt disrupt their presumably stable, orderly destinations (Vigneswaran 2013). The inherent characteristic of migrants traversing territorial and at times cultural boundaries has also been viewed as a threat to nation states, particularly in relation to human security (Iwata and Nemoto 2017; Nyamnjoh 2015), calling as a result, for the control, regulation and even elimination of specific migrants. This profiling of migrants, particularly

in Africa, is rooted in the two processes of colonial racism and post-colonial nationalism.

Although, nationalism and racism are distinct notions, in postcolonial societies the two have shaped each other. While nationalism has had other symbols such as the national anthem and national flag, racism's symbol was the body itself (Mosse 1995). Nationalism as a racial project draws on indigenous discourses of difference that distinguish between nationals and non-nationals. Mignolo (2017) argues that 'the nation-state cares (in practice but not in theory) for nationals and not for human beings. Non-nationals are lesser human beings; they are foreigners, immigrants, refugees, and for colonial settlers, indigenous from the land they settled in are second class nationals' (ibid.: 40). In South Africa, the trope of citizenship is used on specific African nationalities and ethnicities identified as foreigners. Because they are perceived to be lesser human beings, black foreigners become the targets of xenophobic attacks.

The racial profiling of black migrants from Africa is based on the unstated assumption of a linear model of modernity in which migrants are presumed to move from a less to a more developed territory (Iwata and Nemoto 2017; Silverstein 2005). Neocosmos (2008) makes a similar argument by situating racial dynamics within apartheid's anti-rural, pro-urban rhetoric, in which black people were ruralized and devalued, while white people were urbanized and valued. The movement of the so-called ruralized black (South) Africans into urban areas was thus regulated and constrained by the pass laws. Neocosmos further argues that 'the post-apartheid state simply shifted this rural/urban binary opposition to Africa/South Africa, such that Africa is perceived as rural and backward and South Africa as urban and modern' (quoted by Matsinhe 2011: 298). This is a common observation among the colonized, as Fanon noted among the Antilleans, who considered themselves to be white and thus different from the Negro, who is said to live in Africa. South Africans, both white and black, do not view or rather want to be viewed as belonging to that part of Africa that has been ruralized and devalued (Matsinhe 2011). For whites, this consciousness has lasted from the peak of goldmining, where South Africa was the headquarters of European migrants who tried to make the country as European as possible. For the black South Africans this discourse of exceptionalism is powered by their desire to distance themselves from their fellow Africans or their so-called 'poorer relatives' (Neocosmos 2008, 591) from rural Africa, who come with their dirt and outdated religious and cultural baggage, different from their own.

In the western world, the visible and often perceived differences in phenotypes have been a major source of racialization, as evidenced by the stereotyping of bodies that are not white and from non-western countries as culturally inferior, foreign, dangerous and therefore unwanted (Iwata and Nemoto 2017). Lan (2019), in her study of African migrants in China, explores the idea of blackness and foreignness and postulates that 'African migrants' black skin colour, coupled with the language barrier and cultural misunderstandings in daily interactions, often serve to reinforce their 'foreigner' status (ibid.: 15). While this may be understandable in the context of China, South Africa presents a different case, as there is no physical distinction between the African migrants and locals: if anything, they share the same ancestral and linguistical roots, in addition to a common colonial history. However, African migrants are still racialized as 'foreigners' in South Africa based on their nationality, class and immigration status. A similar observation is recorded by Iwata and Nemoto (2017), who find that the racialization of Japanese Brazilians in Japan is not based on phenotype, but on nationality, class, language and cultural differences. Another observation was made among the Victorian Irish, who were racialized by the British using the derogatory term 'white chimpanzees' to label them (Martin 2014: 52).

This paper contributes to existing literature on South-South racialization by examining how the outbreak of Covid-19 provides a historical con-

juncture that brings together multiple forms of racialization (e.g. colonial racism, post-apartheid nationalism, xenophobia), which involves multiple institutional and individual actors (the state, anti-racist activists, NGO workers, individual South African citizens) as depicted in the case studies that follow.

While all black Africans were framed as native foreigners by the apartheid government, racial profiling in post-apartheid South Africa happens at multiple levels (Mullings 2005). First are the majority black South Africans, or rather the dominant ethnic groups who having been alienated by the white supremacist society, and who distinguish the nativity and citizenship of their fellow black South Africans from ethnic minorities, possibly as efforts to qualify themselves as non-foreigners. On another level are the marginalized black South Africans, who reproduce the white discourse of racialization by targeting their hatred and xenophobia against the black African migrants and racializing them as 'foreigners.' This was pronounced during the pandemic and was captured by the Put South Africa First campaign, which called for distinction along national lines. In all these processes, the white South Africans and white migrants have remained unscathed and their foreignness went unquestioned, making it a battle between two black minorities, one native, the other consisting of migrants, as illustrated in the case studies that follow.

### Zimbabweans are not Refugees: Nationalism before Covid-19 [2]

In November 2017, I attended a workshop organized by Men and Boys in collaboration with several other NGOs and government departments that was aimed at bringing South Africans and African migrants together. It came after the xenophobic attacks that had been reported close to Johannesburg inner city in February 2017, a few months prior to the workshop. During the attacks, shops were looted, and supposed foreigners were attacked by South Africans. The aggression and violence against African immigrants were widely covered in the newspapers, on national television and on social media. Some politicians, including the former Gauteng Community Safety MEC, spoke out, condemning the atrocious acts meted out on fellow Africans and calling for peace. Men and Boys and its partners came up with an intervention plan. This workshop was one of the proposed interventions. Moris, a migrant from Rwanda, was the facilitator of the workshop, working for Men and Boys. During the workshop Moris revived an argument that had begun the previous day and could not be resolved. The argument arose after one South African woman had expressed her disdain of supposed foreigners, here referring to Zimbabweans. After a moment of silence, she spoke out.

> I lost my job at SABC (South African Broadcasting Cooperation) because of some Zimbabwean. They take our jobs, these people, even our *spaza* (convenience) shops. The Somalis are selling the same commodities at a cheaper price, and they do not tell us where they get their stock. In the end, all our customers go to their shops. What happens to us? Another thing [is,] they (Zimbabweans) are starting their funny '*mapostori* churches' in our parks. Here you find one church in a few meters another group of people, they are *messing up* our beautiful parks. Then there are these Nigerians who are selling drugs to our kids bringing in corruption.

This was MaZodwa, a South African woman in her late fifties. She was unemployed and spent her time attending community programs offered by the government or NGOs. According to Moris, MaZodwa was one of the self-appointed community leaders who were mobilizing community members against foreign nationals. MaZodwa made it clear that she was firm in her opinion that foreigners should go back to their own countries.

Although MaZodwa's passion-filled outburst left many people uncomfortable, in a way it summarized the whole discussion surrounding the xenophobic narrative in South Africa. Moris responded to MaZodwa by reading out the UNHCR definition of a refugee as stipulated in human rights code. Intending to draw empathy,

[2] Case study extracted from PhD thesis by author (2021)

he explained how so many migrants and refugees are forced to be in South Africa due to war in their own countries, for example. The woman interrupted, pointing out that Zimbabweans were not refugees. 'They are just *parasites* who cannot fix their own country but come to take over from our [South African] inheritance', she added. In this statement she uses various terms to distinguish herself from the migrants she was describing. She identifies herself as representing South Africans, who in her opinion are the victims of others who have come to take away their inheritance, which they supposedly acquired through the liberation struggles that ousted the apartheid regime.[3] She also presents South Africa as an orderly and clean country, with beautiful parks, that is under attack from filthy migrants. During the colonial and apartheid periods the racial segregation in many parts of Africa was premised on the reasoning that the blacks would bring disorder and dirt to those places (mainly cities) that had been designated for white people. To a certain extent, this reproduces the colonial discourse of racializing black South Africans as 'foreigners'.

Left speechless and seeing that no amount of persuasion or talk of morality could convince MaZodwa, Moris resorted to the constitution and reminded MaZodwa that violence was a criminal offence. 'The constitution postulates that everybody should receive equal treatment irrespective of their race, gender and nationality', he said as he handed out a small book entitled '*The Constitution of South Africa'* to the participants. South Africa has been commended for having a progressive constitution based on the tenets of equality. Famously known as the Equality Clause, the constitution stipulates that 'Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law'. However, based on the arguments made by anti-immigrant protestors, it is apparent that not everyone is equal and not everyone deserves protection, and that not everyone deserves relief during the pandemic. It is evident in MaZodwa's remark that while some migrants such as refugees may indeed deserve sympathy, some do not deserve to benefit from the South African government. Although MaZodwa's reaction may have been influenced by state and/or NGO discourses, her refusal to accept the categorization of Zimbabweans as deserving refutes the long-standing argument of xenophobic violence arising as a result of evil politicians and innocent masses (Misago 2011). MaZodwa voluntarily subscribed to the anti-immigrant discourses based on her personal experiences, which fed into her broader claim of 'migrants taking our jobs'. The same claim was made by the Put South Africa First protestors explored below. While the South African Frist movement has been long brewing in the country, during the pandemic the movement found a platform to express their dissatisfaction with the government. There was an outbreak of protests not only Twitter 'streets' but also in the physical streets, as well as on different social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. Below I describe the campaign.

**Put South Africa First: Nationalism during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

The hashtag movement originated with the South African First political party, whose president, Mario Khumalo, had always criticised the ruling ANC government for failing to control immigration flows or provide economic opportunities for South African citizens. He accused the state of 'rewarding illegal immigrants with jobs and business rather than deporting them' (Rampedi 2020), a sentiment that was also brought up during the 2008 xenophobic attacks (Misago 2011). He further argued that xenophobia was a label being used by his critics to silence him and his supporters. On Twitter this campaign has been popularized with multiple vocal voices, with the prominent one being @uLerato Pillay, considered a fictional character by the Daily Maverick (2020), who joined Twitter in November 2019

[3] Interestingly some African migrants use the same trope to claim a share of the South African economy, stating that they helped South Africa during the liberation struggle.

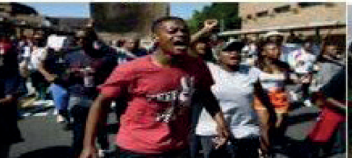
and had almost sixty thousand followers by August 2020. Curious about who this supposedly fictional character was, the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC) conducted an investigation and established that this account was at the centre of a 'well-oiled propaganda machine with a web of 80 interconnected Twitter accounts that interact with each other, recycle one another's tweets' (Bezuidenhout 2020 n.p). Another famous figure supporting the Put South Africa First Movement is Gayton McKenzie, the president of the Patriotic Alliance political party of South Africa, who since 2013 has been lobbying the government to prioritize poor South Africans in handing out economic opportunities, 'whether Black, White, Coloured or Indian'. His approach emphasizes class and nationality or citizenship over race. Below I share one of the flyers that was circulating around various social media platforms in August 2020.

**#PutSouthAfricansFirst**

Peoples march to President Cyril Ramaphosa against high immigration

**WE WANT OUR COUNTRY BACK**

29 August 2020



**WE DEMAND:-**

- Secured borders – No more illegal immigration!
- Deportation of millions of illegal immigrants inside South Africa
- Open refugee camps next to the borders and stop turning our cities into refugee camp filth
- Stop Lesotho and Zimbabwe special VISA
- Reduce legal immigration. We can't afford it!
- Stop immigrants from using our hospitals & clinic for free
- Stop immigrants from getting social grants
- Stop immigrants from operating churches
- Stop employment of millions of immigrants. Hire South Africans
- Impose travel bans on Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia, Ethiopia and Malawi to stop the criminality of their citizens and high immigration
- Remove immigrants from our CBDs and clean our towns again and bring back South Africans who ran away from CBDs
- Stop immigrants from operating small businesses
- Implement a catch and deport system and stop the long deportation process.
- Set annual immigration targets and stop this bottomless acceptance of immigrants and refugees.
- Stop the abuse of the South African passport by foreigners

**WE DEMAND LAW AND ORDER IN SOUTH AFRICA!**
**STOP THE IMPUNITY OF IMMIGRANTS!**
**VOLUNTEER TODAY!!!!**

The demands made in this flyer confirm the argument raised in the first case study. It refers to the so-called parasitic behaviour of some migrants who have come to South Africa. The demand to 'Stop immigrants from using our hospitals and clinics for free' could have been informed by rumours circulating on social media (including the We Are One WhatsApp group) of hospital beds filling up quickly due to the rapidly spreading disease. The flier also demanded that nationalities should be denied special visas, such as citizens of Lesotho and Zimbabwe. The special permits given to these nationalities were meant to ease pressure on the asylum system, for example, the Documentation of Zimbabweans Project (2010). However, this was read by some South Africans as showing special favours to foreigners at the expense of the citizens. The online protesters also called for the imposition of travel bans on Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Somalia, countries generally viewed as a threat based on identified cultural differences. In mainstream media Nigerians have been framed as drug-dealers, Mozambicans and Zimbabweans as illegals and Somalis as hungry parasites (Neocosmos 2008; Musariri 2021).

In addition to banning illegal migrants, the protestors also requested reducing the numbers of legal migrants, claiming that the country could not afford to take them. Migrants were associated with filth, echoing the sentiments made by MaZodwa in the first case study that foreigners were making South Africa's 'beautiful parks dirty'. The protestors make an explicit call to clean up the city accompanied by a Twitter campaign: 'Operation clean-up South Africa'. In this campaign, the protestors called upon fellow South Africans to join them in 'cleaning up the city', removing its filth and criminality. The campaign had several hashtags that went viral, including #23SeptemberCleanSA & #PutSouthAfricansFirst march with us for a safer South Africa free of immigrant criminals! #zimbabwemustgo #NigeriansMustGo #VoetsekNigerians.[4]

Following the various noises made on social media, which were accompanied by street protests, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa addressed the nation, stating that the government was reviewing the hiring of foreign nationals in South Africa. During his address, the President clarified that, while he was against populist sentiments blaming the foreigners for the unemployment in South Africa, he did agree that there was a need to review the country's foreign labour policies. To this end, he had established an inter-ministerial committee to look into the issues raised.[5] He issued a statement that, 'By the same measure, we need to understand that we must respond to the frustration of our own people at the violation of immigration laws and other regulations by those companies that employ foreign nationals illegally.' Both before and after this statement, five photos of Zimbabwean passports were posted in the We Are On WhatsApp group with a 'double stamp' symbolizing deportation and being banned from entering South Africa for five years. The reason was that the holders of these passports had overstayed their permitted time in South Africa during the lockdown. This shows how the regulation of migrants' mobility was more than just rhetoric. In the following sections, I situate the two case studies within the broader, contemporary and historical political landscape of South Africa.

### Contextualizing the Case Studies

The two case studies described above make it evident that the supposed problem of foreigners in South Africa does not apply to everyone who has the status of migrant. The notions of belonging, citizenship and associated deservingness before and during the pandemic were shaped by various factors, including race, class, immigration status and distinct notions of foreignness. Commenting on the South African response to refugee protection during the pandemic, Moyo et al. (2021: 2) have already argued that the response

[4] https://twitter.com/better_SA_fan/status/1305235602594500608?s=20

[5] https://businesstech.co.za/news/business/429332/government-to-review-rules-around-hiring-foreign-workers-in-south-africa/

was led by the 'desire to gain legitimacy from a frustrated public', a finding established by Landau (2011) more than a decade ago during his inquiry into the xenophobic protests of 2008. I concur with these assertions and argue that the South African state and some subpopulations took advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic to express and manifest the already existing sentiments and policies against black African immigrants. I further argue that the selection process regarding which migrants to exclude and/or include can be understood as a form of racialization of black African migrants based on intersecting factors that go beyond nationality, immigration status, class and race. I draw on the peculiar history of South Africa, where the colonial logic of racial differentiation had a bearing on the governance of movements of people, both within South Africa and beyond.

South African history is marred by violent racial and ethnic segregation, marginalization and discrimination, institutionalized under the apartheid regime, whose legacy and social effects have survived to this day, despite its official abolition in the early1990s. Instituted in 1948, apartheid was characterized by a political culture of white supremacy that stratified people according to their alleged phenotypes (Neocosmos 2008). According to Mullings (2005), white ethnic groups in South Africa (the British and the Boers) were formerly at war but decided to join forces and use the apartheid regime to unify whites by excluding blacks, Indians and Coloureds (mixed race), thus justifying white supremacy anchored in biological determinism. Neocosmos (2010) suggests that, as the whites came to identify themselves as South Africans, they identified the black South Africans as 'foreign natives' and 'non-national'. The idea of a black man being foreign to the African soil was ingrained in the minds of the black majority by the white supremacists.

Black South Africans were therefore racialized as foreign natives and governed by laws such as the Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act of 1970, which restricted their mobility socially, economically, politically and geographically. People were assigned places of residence based on their ethnic and racial categorizations. Movement between residentially segregated urban spaces and places was regulated by the Group Areas Act of 1950. People who took up residence in other areas were considered illegal residents warranting arrest or detention. Rural areas, also known as 'reserves' or Bantustans, were designated for black South Africans, while urban areas were reserved for whites. Black men and women were allowed in the city to work as wage labourers, but had to leave their families behind in the rural areas.

In 1994 the apartheid system was abolished, resulting in the repeal of the repressive laws that had been used to discriminate systematically against the black population. During the same period, several African countries were going through political, social and economic challenges, such as those induced by structural adjustment programmes (Musariri 2021). The relatively lax migration laws of the post-apartheid period, coupled with rapid globalization, also saw South Africa opening its doors to other African countries. The newly legalized freedom of the post-apartheid period did not facilitate international mobility alone, it also resulted in the mass migration of black people into South Africa. Inner-city Johannesburg, formerly inhabited by a largely white population of European descent, slowly became a haven for black African immigrants who occupied areas such as Hillbrow, Berea and Yeoville. The wealthier whites moved out of the inner city to the spacious outskirts of Johannesburg, making room for economically marginalized black South Africans (Musariri 2021). The latter made their way into the inner city, making the inner city a convergence and concentration zone for both internal and international migrants (Vearey et al. 2017). As inner-city residence, they are on the margins of the economy, being plagued with chronic unemployment and poverty. In such contexts of multiple inequalities, competition over resources steepens and economic deprivation intensifies, as do margins

of distinction, to the point that all those who are not South Africans become the 'others' who are supposedly out to get jobs, houses and women 'belonging' to locals (Landau, 2011). The distinctions between who is West African, East African or a Southerner are amplified, classist codes of nationalism are called into the picture, tribal margins are drawn, and violence becomes a useful tool with which to reorder categories and bring back social boundaries (Hickel 2014).

**Xenophobia in Post-apartheid South Africa**

For a few decades, several South African anti-immigrant protesters have raised the alarm around the issue of porous borders and undocumented immigrants. As a result, nationals from other African countries foreigners are called derogatory names such as *kwerekwere*, criminals and parasites, labels which are hardly applied to non-African migrants. The Community Health Survey conducted by Statistics South Africa in 2016 confirms that there is an 'uncontrolled influx (of migrants which) comes at a high cost for the poor masses expecting improved standards of living from the present government' (2016: 2). The same survey estimated that there were 1.5 million migrants living in South Africa. According to the report, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho, Malawi and Britain continue to be the top five sending countries, with Zimbabwe recording over a third of the migrants (Statistics South Africa 2016). Previously Zimbabweans in South Africa had been labelled a 'human tsunami' (Misago 2011: 91). Due to this high proportion of migrants, Zimbabweans and Basotho in South Africa have been a target of xenophobic attacks, among other nationalities such as Nigerians and Somalis who are identified as illegal criminals and economic parasites, but hardly anything of this affects migrants from Britain.

Anti-immigrant South Africans have condemned the government, claiming that it could do more to control the immigration flows and protect the economic and social interests of its citizens (Misago 2011). Recent years have seen a notable increase in the intolerance of foreigners since the 1994-95 Operation Buyelekhaya ('Go Back Home') to the most recent Operation Dudula of 2022.[6] Cross-cutting the protesters' sentiments and re-emerging following Covid-19 are claims of failure by the South Africa government to curb undocumented migration – mostly of black Africans – and provide economic opportunities for South Africans, especially the low-skilled black population. This line of thought has been refuted by various scholars, who have attributed xenophobic violence to the long-standing fear of and animosity towards foreigners and to state discourses blaming foreigners for the country's social and economic decline, which helps create the xenophobic climate (Zanker and Moyo 2021; Landau 2011; Misago 2011). Misago (2011) specifically foregrounds the important role of local politics and leadership, the lack of conflict resolution mechanisms and the culture of impunity as pivotal to the emergence of xenophobic violence in South Africa.

Migration in post-apartheid South Africa has been governed by, first, the Aliens Control Act of 1991, which was responsible for thousands of deportations of African migrants when the international borders opened after apartheid (Monson and Arian 2011). After this came the current Immigration Act of 2002 and the Refugees Act of 1998, which regulate international migration and refugee asylum-seeking respectively. Despite the claims regarding the lax immigration laws, South Africa's approach to the governance of migration had always emphasized securitization undergirded by racist and xenophobic tendencies (Vearey et al. 2021; Moyo et al. 2021) while encouraging the immigration of highly skilled labour and excluding low-skilled migrants. The underlying assumptions informing migration legislation and policies is that, if not controlled, an influx of 'useless' migrants will come into the country and destabilize its economic and social fabric (Neocosmos 2008). Since the March

[6] https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/4/8/what-is-operation-dudula-s-africas-anti-immigration-vigilante

2020 lockdown the securitization of migration has increased, as evidenced by the deployment of the South African National Defence Forces (SANDF) and South African Police Services (SAPS) at specific South African borders and strategic places throughout the country to maintain order (Zanker and Moyo 2021). As shown in the second case study, there has also been a notable resurgence of populist ideologies of nationalism in the form of online movements consisting of South Africans protesting against 'foreigners'. The Put South Africa First' social media campaign garnered support from across the spectrum, with political and elite backing. Once again migrants from specific African countries were used as the scapegoats for the ongoing social and economic challenges facing many South Africans, aggravated further as result of Covid-19.

**Xenophobia and Covid-19**

According to South Africa's Quarterly Labour Force Survey, the official unemployment rate was at 30% as of the first quarter of the year 2020 and 35.3% at the end of 2021 (Statistics South Africa 2022). Another report of August 2020 states that an estimated 1.5 million people lost their jobs due to the lockdown (Statistics South Africa 2020). The Covid-19 crisis has led to a fall in formal employment, and nine out of ten South African businesses have reported reductions in turnover (ILO 2020). The fifty-four percent of households in South Africa that have been pushed out of permanent jobs to informal or temporary contracts as a coping mechanism for businesses affected by Covid-19 were likely to fall into poverty after the six-month stimulus package ended (UNDP South Africa 2020). In contexts of existing inequalities, crises in whatever form tend to have similar unequal effects. Unemployment and poverty are both amplified in migrant populations, increasing their precarity (ILO 2020, Landau 2011). Migrant populations, particularly the undocumented, survive in the informal labour market, which was hit hard by Covid-19. This was exacerbated by the government, which adopted an 'us' (citizens) and 'them' (non-citizens) dichotomy in their administration of the relief projects, which were only made available to South African citizens and specific type of migrants, such as those with the status of permanent residence. Several migrants found themselves excluded from these relief projects. Foreign-owned businesses were not allowed to operate during the lockdown (Zanker and Moyo 2021). Even after the lockdown, jobs that were occupied by migrants (mostly black), such as waiting at tables and cleaning, were now reserved to South African citizens only. A South African national identity document (ID) was now a requirement to get not only jobs but cash-based relief.

To fill the gap made by the South African government, international humanitarian NGOs offered relief packages to non-South Africans, albeit from specific countries, leaving out those who did not meet their criteria in a way that constituted a hierarchization of migrants. Although it would go beyond the scope of this paper, I propose looking at the role of development actors such as international NGOs in contributing to the process of othering by placing people in hierarchical categories such as refugee, migrant or asylum-seeker (Vanyoro et al 2019). This selective exclusion of certain categories of migrants cannot be divorced from the official categories established by development actors such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). In its 1951 Refugee Convention, the UNHCR identified a refugee as one who flees their country for fear of being persecuted (UNHCR 2010), a definition that excludes many migrants from African countries, who flee their countries for economic reasons. For example, according to the census Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Lesotho make up the top three migrant-sending countries. Because such migrants move to South Africa for economic reasons, they become 'effectively naturalized and gendered as the *homo economics'* (Silverstein 2005: 372), and their economic efforts to survive are 'criminalized' (Neocosmos 2010). Without the protection of the human rights 'law', such foreigners

are exposed and become more vulnerable. Again, not having refugee status excludes them from the mainstream economy and other facets of life, as expressed in MaZodwa's comment that 'Zimbabweans were not refugees'. From these case studies, it is evident that not every migrant is a foreigner and not all foreigners are problematic. The tweet shared above show that the protesters do not have a problem with all foreigners, thus refuting the definition of xenophobia as a fear of foreign nationals. As in the case of racial projects where access to whiteness was regulated by class (Mullings 2005), here degrees of foreignness among migrants are shaped by hegemonic ideologies of foreignness that go beyond legal discourses to include not only non-nationals but also South Africans from less dominant ethnic groups (Neocosmos 2010).

It is apparent that, while the socio-economic impacts of Covid-19 were felt by everyone across the spectrum, response mechanisms, such as the relief packages, were distributed according to categories of 'citizens' and 'non-citizens', or rather 'non-humans', to quote Mignolo (2017: 40), thus leaving out many migrants who were already wallowing in poverty and hunger. The language of migrants as 'non-human' in this case suffices, as the exclusion of migrants from receiving food packages implies that they are deemed non-humans who do not feel any hunger. This can also be deduced in the language used by the Put South Africa First protestors. An example is a Twitter post calling upon South African citizens to join them in 'cleaning up the city' by getting rid of the 'immigrant criminals' and their 'dirt'. In the same tweet, the protestors used hashtags targeting specific countries, as noted above. This profiling of migrants was associated with the statuses given to the respective countries, based on perceived cultural ideologies, as well as socio-economic conditions, such as Nigeria's association with drug-dealing (Neocosmos 2010) and Zimbabwe's with political and economic failure. Beyond this, such framing of difference can be paralleled to the colonial logic of racial differentiation.

**Conclusion**

Covid-19 is said to have exacerbated already existing inequalities and forms of violence. One such pre-existing form of inequality was xenophobia. Scholars across disciplines have come up with various reasons to explain the occurrence of xenophobia in South Africa, including globalization and chauvinistic nationalism as hangovers of the colonial and apartheid regimes. Central to all these arguments is the notion that xenophobia is fuelled by systems and practices that order human beings into categories that emphasize alterity and difference, such as the examples cited above. Indeed, while globalization and associated economic deprivation as a contributor to xenophobic violence maybe applicable to a certain extent to the South African context (Misago 2011), this line of thought still does not explain the hierarchization of migrants, as in the tweet cited above, which specifically targets Nigerians and Zimbabweans. This argument could only account for the frustration and desperation of the perpetrators, and it fails to explain why certain nationalities were targeted (Neocosmos 2008). Not all migrants are foreigners, and not all foreigners are considered dangerous to society.

While the response of the government during the pandemic was nationalistic in that it divided the population into citizens and non-citizens (migrants), according to some South Africans, represented by MaZodwa and the Put South Africa First protestors, not all migrants were foreigners and not all foreigners were undeserving. I have argued that it is the racial profiling of specific migrants based on the intersecting factors of nationality, immigration status, class and race, and drawing on the codes of foreignness, that determined who was excluded or included. I have further argued that this racialization has its roots in colonial racism and post-apartheid nationalism and found a channel of expression during the Covid-19 pandemic, where the government had to respond to the crisis in a way that appeased already frustrated and marginalized black South Africans. Although all these

issues preceded Covid-19, the pandemic indeed provided an avenue for both individuals and collectives to express their long brewing anti-immigrant sentiments and direct them against black African migrants.

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