

# **European Immigrants in Johannesburg: Perceptions, Privileges and their Implications for Migration Experiences**

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This paper presents qualitative data from two independent studies on South African attitudes towards immigrants and European immigration to South Africa, respectively. The data demonstrates that many South Africans perceive Europeans to be unproblematic and even contribute to the country, and that European immigrants in Johannesburg enjoy a privileged experience of immigration, especially as compared to their African counterparts. The visible outcomes of European privileges such as international mobility and access to resources accumulated in and by European states, contextualized in experiences and legacies of the apartheid regime, are reflected in perceptions of European immigrants in South Africa. Moreover, perceptions of European immigrants shape their privileged experience and enable their social mobility in a deeply segregated country by exempting them from migration politics and xenophobia and facilitating their economic integration.

Keywords: racial hierarchies, xenophobia, whiteness, visa regimes, borders

## INTRODUCTION

South Africa, also called Mzansi, hosts millions of immigrants from all over the world, the majority from southern Africa. Immigration is integral to South Africa's economy (OECD and ILO, 2018; StatsSA 2019). Yet, immigration policies are increasingly restrictive, promoting – like many immigration countries – temporary, skilled international migration while seeking to exclude ‘unwanted’ migrant groups (Crush and Tshitereke, 2001; Peberdy, 2001; Madue, 2015; Pokroy, 2015). A considerable concentration of foreigners (and South Africans) live in Gauteng Province, around Johannesburg and Pretoria, which is also a region with high reported incidences of xenophobic violence (Mlilo and Misago, 2019). Everyday xenophobia and repeated eruptions of xenophobic violence – including an outbreak during the time of the research presented in this paper – is the subject of fierce debate in South Africa, with explanations on a continuum from disavowal of xenophobia as a factor in eruptions of violence to recognition that South Africa contends with extreme xenophobia, which manifests in violence (Crush and Ramachandran, 2014). Xenophobic violence has been variously explained by legacies of colonial group relations (Matsinhe, 2011), local governance structures, denialism on the part of political leadership (Neocosmos, 2006), micro-political economies of violence (Misago, 2017; 2019) and proximity of outsiders to disadvantaged South Africans who are still struggling for economic freedom (Tewolde, 2020). Predominantly African and Asian immigrant communities, employees and businesses are targeted (Dube, 2018; Moyo et al., 2018; Tewolde, 2020); white, European immigrants appear to be spared.

According to 2020 estimates, a quarter of a million European immigrants are recorded as residing in South Africa, making up just under a tenth of the country’s documented migrant stock (UNDESA, 2020).<sup>1</sup> South Africa is a well-established destination for European migrants. A former settler colony,<sup>2</sup> various waves of European migration since the late 1600s have established the largest national population of people with European origin in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>3</sup> Long after formal decolonization, so-called ‘white South Africans’ benefited from white minority rule, and still enjoy significant socio-economic power today. Since democracy was attained in 1994, majority democratic rule, revoking discriminatory legislation and introducing Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) policies have not (yet) significantly reconfigured social, spatial and economic inequality and distribution of resources in post-apartheid South Africa (see e.g., Nnadozie, 2013; Wa Azania, 2014; Shai et al., 2019). For instance, South Africa’s labor market is

<sup>1</sup> However, Statistics South Africa (StatsSA, 2020) estimates that a significantly higher number of foreign-born people live in South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> A settler colony, in contrast to a resource/extraction colony, includes the intention to establish a permanent non-military community. European settlements were established in many African lands. South Africa’s began with the Cape Colony, initially designed as a refueling post for the Verenigde Oos-Indiese Kompanjie (VOC, Dutch East India Company).

<sup>3</sup> The so-called ‘white’ population stabilized at just under 20% of the South African population, but has declined since 1994 – in 2020, the ‘white’ population group was estimated at around 8% of the total population (StatsSA, 2020). Compared to settler colonies on other continents (e.g., USA, Australia), empire migration to South Africa was considered unsuccessful because the European population never reached a majority (Harper and Constantine, 2010: 111-112; 122-131).

still characterized by racial dualism and low mobility between a minority, formally educated and wealthy, ‘white’ elite, and a tightly controlled, disempowered, ‘black’ majority providing a profitable surplus labor reserve (Cassim, 1982; Burger and Jafta, 2006; Naidoo et al., 2014).

In comparison to historical migrations of Europeans and contemporary migrations of, especially, Africans, trends, characteristics and experiences of contemporary European migration have not been widely researched. This is a gap this paper aims to contribute towards. Drawing on two qualitative studies conducted in Johannesburg in 2019–2020, described in the following section, this paper discusses European immigrant experiences in South Africa and South Africans’ perceptions of European immigrants, exploring the interplay of social recognition and legal authorization (Ambrosini, 2015) in relation to privileged migrants. We question how perceptions reflect and shape lived experiences of European immigrants in Johannesburg, and the ways in which they are spared injustices associated with the enforcement of restrictive immigration. The South African and European participants in the two studies presented in this paper demonstrate an awareness of racial hierarchies and often use ‘black’/‘white’ interchangeably with ‘African’/‘European’, especially to refer to polarized figures and experiences. While South Africa is home to a ‘rainbow’ of peoples, ‘black’ and ‘white’ are co-constructed racialized identities (Gartushka, 2020), often juxtaposed in ways that obscure the complex racial hierarchy entrenched in the South African economy. As a population described by the geopolitical continent of their citizenship/nationality, European immigrants do not necessarily identify as ‘white’ nor do they have homogenous experiences of immigration or privilege. Although European immigrants’ experiences are nuanced, we interrogate whether unchecked positive perceptions of them grant them exemption from xenophobia and border policing, facilitate their economic integration and preserve their privilege.

## SOURCES OF DATA AND METHODS

This research paper presents an analysis of findings from two qualitative studies derived from 88 interviews in 2019–2020 in Johannesburg. Both studies were conducted in English and underwent formal ethical review.

Over the course of 15 months, Jones conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 68 individual participants and one focus group of five participants, all of whom self-identified as South African. The questionnaire was divided into sections that address the following overarching questions:

1. How do South Africans feel about the presence of immigrants in South Africa?
2. Do South Africans’ attitudes toward immigrants vary according to the immigrants’ nationality, race, ethnicity, occupation, or socio-economic class?

3. Do South Africans' attitudes toward immigrants vary according to their own race, ethnicity, occupation, or socio-economic class?
4. Are there consistencies in attitudes across certain South African demographic groups?

The questions focused specifically on the context of the Johannesburg metropolitan area. The sample included diversity in race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, and occupation. Of the 73 participants, 30 were women and 43 were men. The majority of the participants (52) self-identified as black, 11 coloured, seven white, and three Indian. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 83 years. The participants were primarily identified using the snowball sampling technique, although a conscious effort was made to maintain racial, regional, and socio-economic diversity. The participants were interviewed in locations of their choice.

Between July 2019 and March 2020, Last conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with European immigrants (people who entered South Africa on a passport issued by a European Union/European Economic Community Member State) living in Johannesburg. The aim was to explore experiences of privileged migration and strategies adopted by European immigrants to navigate South Africa's immigration regime. The researcher is herself a European immigrant to South Africa and the participants were recruited through convenience sampling, including three friends, six professional and social acquaintances, one referral by a participant and five referrals by friends and acquaintances who did not participate in the study themselves. The participants are nationals-from-birth of Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom (UK), Italy, Spain, Denmark and Bulgaria. While all participants migrated to South Africa in adulthood, the length of time spent in South Africa at the time of interview ranged from six months to over two decades.

The participants were interviewed alone or with their partner, in locations of their choice. Last began each interview with, "I like to start with your 'origin story': How did you come to live in South Africa?" After the participants' opening narratives, the interviews became conversational. The researcher asked questions of clarification that followed from the opening narrative and shared relevant experiences and emerging ideas to co-create narratives around topics that are relevant to immigration, such as passports, visa applications, embassies, borders and immigration enforcement.

Through conversation, the complementary nature of the two studies became apparent. Jones analyzed transcripts of interviews from her study to identify perceptions of European immigrants among South Africans in Johannesburg. These perceptions served as themes in the analysis of transcripts of interviews from Last's study – the aim being to explore ways in which perceptions reflected and shaped participating Europeans' experiences and strategies of immigrating to South Africa.

## SOUTH AFRICANS' PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPEAN IMMIGRANTS

When asked about their perceptions of immigrants, the majority of South African participants referred to immigrants from other African countries, their assumption being that immigrants entered South Africa primarily from these countries. Europeans are largely absent from South Africans' imagined identity of an immigrant. In discussions of South Africans' perceptions of immigrants, the participants were not explicitly asked how they feel about white immigrants or the white population in general. However, the inclusion of their sentiments toward these groups in their narratives offered some insight into the widely accepted view of European immigrants as generally unproblematic.

A black South African woman offered an explanation for why xenophobic violence primarily targets Africans:

I think in general we have a tendency as South Africans to potentially view European immigrants as potentially OK and non-European immigrants as different, and that for me is a construct of competition for scarce resources, more than anything else because the resentment that a lot of the lower class – when I say lower class, I don't mean it in a bad way, you know what I mean, low socio-economic income people – feel towards foreign nationals – African foreign nationals – it's really because of the fact that they compete for the same resources more than anything else, whereas most of the Europeans who come in here are people who are competing at a different level and I don't think they experience the same kind of discrimination. I mean, there's a lot of multinational companies in this country and people always export talent and more often than not you've got a CEO who is either American or British. It's not frowned upon. They get treated differently.

A white South African man shared a similar expression that Europeans are perceived to be superior, although he added that this perception is a legacy of colonialism:

From my understanding, immigrants from other countries, particularly European countries, are seen as like a boon, they're seen as bringing their skills to enrich Africa and that, once again, is part of the brainwashing that we've endured, of colonial is better, Europe is better, Europe is superior.

A black South African woman, explained that white immigrants were less likely to be seen as an economic threat because their professional positions are deemed to be out of the reach of the black population and as such, they are contributing to the country's economy rather than being in direct competition with the majority of workers:

For the most part, most of them come here with a job, with a set-up, so their presence here is less impacted on the people who are already here. So it's not

often felt like, “that French guy took my job”, because often it’s the thought that I don’t know whether I was eligible for the job that the French guy was doing.

A black South African woman expressed her praise for European immigrants, whom she considers to be beneficial to South African society, in juxtaposition to African immigrants, whom she associates with illegality, corruption, tax evasion, and the general degradation of South African society:

Why are we not attacking those people from Europe? It’s not because we are scared of them. They are not here to come and corrupt our country. They are here to try and come and at least improve our economy. They are doing things according to the book. You will not find a company that is owned by a person from Europe or any other country except for Africa whereby you find they are invading [sic] tax, and, and, and. They are here and they try to do things in the legal way, so they are trying to come and help us, you know, better South Africa. But unfortunately for us, these African countries, they are the ones that are messing up our country. It is not fair!!

An unemployed black South African man was adamant that European immigrants make positive contributions to South African society by virtue of their ‘right’ approach to entering South Africa and doing business here, in contrast to the presumed unauthorized access that African immigrants gain, and their consequently malevolent actions:

When the Europeans came here it was in a good manner, they decided to do business in a good manner, in a right manner, for a longer period. Even though maybe right now the statistics may say maybe they are doing wrong, because of how they approve first and how they [are] cooperating with us, they gain trust in us and they gain loyalty in us. So the difference in how others came here from their start to how their intention was... Even if statistics may come out that they [Europeans are] doing wrong, it would be so hard for me to believe because how they came from the start was right.

Across race and class in South Africa, white European immigrants are seen to have positive social and economic impacts, to be entitled to elite, white spaces and positions, and to associate with the white South African population and benefit from their status. Even if the ease of their integration is presumed, Europeans are enabled to navigate and bridge different spaces and are shielded from discrimination and xenophobia. The inflated view of European magnanimity and the legitimacy of their presence in South Africa is compounded by the particular ostracism that African immigrants face (Matsinhe, 2011; Dube, 2018).

## EXPERIENCES OF EUROPEAN IMMIGRANTS IN JOHANNESBURG

### *Contributing to South Africa as a driver of European immigration*

Like most migration projects, the drivers that influence European migration to South Africa are multi-faceted, relational and fluid. Drivers are often articulated in terms of social relations and employment, but family and labor are the dominant legal migration pathways (Massey et al., 1993; Bauer and Zimmerman, 2018) and so immigrants may be inclined to present their motivations in these terms.

A Belgian man, whose temporary residence permit is based on his fluency in Dutch, deemed a 'critical skill' for call centers operating in South Africa, argued that the multinational corporation he works for takes advantage of foreigners searching for a South African residence visa for a myriad of reasons:

They know, from experience, from years, that they will always find some adventurous people who want to come down. I sat next to a lawyer. I sat next to a person who is now working in Belgian Home Affairs, in Pretoria [...]. I sit with a pilot – he just needed to be here because he was finalizing his commercial pilot license. Because, as expensive as it is here, it's cheaper here than in Europe. That was his reason. People who just fell in love with someone and wanted to be here – I'm one of those. You would have to look hard. If you take twenty people, you'll find three or four who are here for IT experience, the company, the CV credentials ... very, very rare, all the other ones, different reasons. Whatever it takes.

Thus, diverse aspirations to migrate are enabled by employers able to secure visas for employees. Families may also support aspirations to migrate. For instance, a German man was enabled to search for work in his chosen profession in South Africa by his parents:

I knew I want to be carpenter, already [...] I tried to find a job, was not so successful. [...] I met a lot of people here. I met my girlfriend just in the last 4 months before my leaving in 2011. And yes, I was in Germany for a year, working. I have been working, but actually also been struggling to find a job. [...] My parents said, if you want, we will support you for a while, if you want you can go to South Africa and try your luck there.

South Africa may not initially be a planned destination for some immigrants, but aspirations can evolve once someone has spent time in the country. For instance, a British woman reluctantly settled for Johannesburg when there were no research projects available in East Africa to complete her London-based Master's degree. Now she does not imagine ever leaving South Africa permanently:

I was supposed to come for just 6 weeks and then I ended up doing an internship [for] just 6 months and then that became a year, then 18 months, then 2 years. And then I decided to apply for a PhD, ended up doing the PhD here and then I just stayed. So it was not intended. Sixteen years. [...] And it is that weird thing, like, 16 years is quite long now and [...] my adult life really began here.

A few participants described wanting to make a contribution to South Africa, but as a justification, not as a driver. For instance, a Catalan-Spanish man described his ongoing struggle to gain residency status that would permit him to work, having accompanied his South African girlfriend (now wife) when she “decided to come back”. Later in the interview, he justified his aspirations:

I'm just a simple man who tries to get married, to reside with my spouse and work and pay taxes here. I just want to pay taxes. I want to pay taxes and contribute to the country.

Paying taxes is presented as a financial contribution to the South African economy, but on the understanding that it secures a status accruing citizenship rights via financial levies by the state (OECD, 2015).

Aspirations to contribute to South Africa were communicated in the context of immigration barriers that participants felt prevented them from utilizing their skills. A Belgian woman with a degree and years of experience in social work thought her skills could help to “uplift” the sector in South Africa, but “they don't give visas for that”. A skilled bicycle mechanic without status in South Africa expressed a similar sentiment, returning to the figure of the taxpayer:

If I had the chance, if I had the status, as a permanent resident – not as citizen, even, as [a] permanent resident – I would give a job to 2 people. [...] For this period of time I interacted with the suppliers and I can order parts, I can do the whole process from the beginning to the end. And it can involve another 2 even 3 people to give a job because of this. So who is ... who loses? The government loses because, first, I don't pay taxes for all this period of time, which I'm repeating, and now, I've reached the maturity to give a job to people, to South Africans.

Although contributing to South Africa emerges more as a justification for staying than a reason to come, many Europeans are structurally facilitated to take up positions that could be viewed as ‘helping’ or ‘bringing skills and expertise’. For instance, capital flows from the Global North to the Global South, in the form of development and humanitarian aid or foreign investment, create jobs for European consultants and via European companies and organizations. In another instance, a German

man first came to South Africa as a volunteer assistant carpentry teacher, funded by the German government as an alternative to military service. Also, a British man described his struggle in the South African labor market as being partly due to a relative lack of overseas development aid, as compared to other African countries, “so you don’t have that grant [sic] swell of development aid-funded project-based positions” that he relied on to work and live in Africa.

The organizations and companies creating these positions, usually with a view to their being taken up by foreigners, also have the governmental connections and administrative capacity to facilitate the immigration process, even when the positions are contentious. For example, a Belgian woman, who developed a strong affinity with South Africa and its peoples through youth exchange programmes, waited years to immigrate. The opportunity finally came in the form of being ‘eyes on the ground’ for European funds dedicated to South African youth development projects:

I loved it, I loved the culture, I loved how people were open and optimistic and whatwhat. Then I always wanted to come back. [...] I was searching, searching, searching to come here, which is not easy, as you know, to find work and [a] permit and what. But I kept being involved [...] Anyway, then after a few years [the Flemish government] wanted somebody here, because they didn’t trust the new leadership [in South Africa]. So they asked me, “Do you want to go?” Ja! That was, like, quite an obvious question, [and] answer. I was waiting for that for years, so I was totally excited. [...] I remember the day I left, my parents were at the airport. I still got an email about them [Flemish and South African governments] fighting about me going. My parents were like, “Come on, do you really need to leave like this?” I was like, “Ach, I don’t care, we’ll see.” Because I really wanted to go.

Access to positions and experience which can be viewed as contributing to South Africa’s development and to legal migration channels, mask myriad pertinent factors driving contemporary European migration to South Africa, including social ties, dynamic economic opportunities and a higher standard of living than Europe. However, such positions provide for temporary residence only. Pathways to status become more obscure once an immigrant aspires to stay in South Africa. Thus, a British man, who first came to South Africa on “the 3-year merry-go-round” of international development consultancy and then married a permanent resident and “decided no, this is the place, we’re going to buy a house, we’re going to settle here”, emphasized repeatedly how this decision “changed everything”.

#### *European immigrants navigating immigration barriers and exclusion*

Most European participants reported struggling to overcome challenges associated with obtaining status and with restrictions imposed by visa conditions, especially those who were looking to stay. Those participants who have been navigating South

African immigration for many years noted that it has become more difficult to secure status since the Government began reforming migration policy in the mid-2010s (Madue, 2015). As one woman described, “it’s not like it’s a thing that it’s only Africans struggling, everybody’s struggling now”. A German participant described the precarious European immigrants experience with status as both a vulnerability to and unfamiliarity with power dynamics:

I know people who have had to go for some periods of time onto a spousal visa or a partnership visa with a South African boyfriend – and those things then just get anxiety-inducing because of the power dynamic. And then you have to go do that silly thing about going on holiday to Swaziland for a weekend to come back in. Like, you know, those things are real. [...] it’s also that sort of – if you’ve never had to deal with it in your own country or anywhere else – there’s that sense of being a bit incensed, like, “What? There’s this institution that has some ability to tell me what to be, where to be!?”

In a bureaucratic, restrictive immigration environment, European immigrants rely on their economic and social capital, as well as the international mobility granted by their European passports, to pursue their aspirations in South Africa. For instance, by leaving South Africa for a few days and re-entering, many European immigrants take advantage of the 3-month visa waiver available for European nationals entering South Africa to extend their stay in the country. Although in recent years the Department of Home Affairs has become more prohibitive with regard to so-called ‘visa runs’. This has predominantly affected land borders and not international airports and information on strategies and routes is shared within immigrant communities. A few participants reported sustaining a temporary but legal status in South Africa this way for years on end, despite the challenges this pathway presents in terms of access to the South African labor market, banking, expenses and organization. In navigating the preferable, regular pathways to residence, European participants often relied on assistance – paid or through privileged social networks – to resolve immigration issues ranging from changing visa conditions in-country to revoking the five-year entry ban imposed for overstaying.

Success in South Africa’s formal labor market determines access to employment-related pathways to status. But success in South Africa’s formal labor market is also dependent on residence status. A Spanish man described his struggle with this circularity in the context of job-seeking:

I’m a software developer. I have, I know, I can see now, I have critical skills that are very scarce here, I could get a job very easy [sic]. The problem was, how I can tell companies that I am from Spain, I don’t have a work permit, I’m married to a South African, I don’t have a work permit but to get one I need an offer of employment. So, if you go through all the processes and you want

to hire me – and the whole process can take 2 weeks to one month – at the end of this long process, we need to apply for my work visa, which is 6-8 weeks, probably 8 weeks. How can I say a company that wants to hire me, they need to wait 8 weeks for me to start working?

In addition to non-permanent status, European participants cited Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) policies as significant obstacles to their employment in the formal South African labor market. BBBEE policies are aimed at transforming the South African economy after apartheid to “enable the meaningful participation of the majority of its citizens” (see RSA, 2003), thus creating a barrier for non-citizens. As a British man with permanent residence explained:

To get to the crux of the matter, [...] as a black – I class myself as black – but as a foreigner, permanent resident, in terms of BBBEE legislation you are invisible, you are a zero, you don't count. [...] for certain positions, employers are looking for... black female is top, followed by black male, then coloured female, then Indian female... there's actually a hierarchy in terms of BBBEE status and BBBEE points. So, yeah, for me, [...] the real issue is not my residency status, it's about the BBBEE legislation and the effect that it has on the number and types of jobs that are open to me. [...] Your foreignness becomes a barrier.

Many European participants relied on their social capital to gain employment in the formal labor market. A British man “was already in discussion with another company” through a professional contact when he resigned from his employer to avoid a transnational intra-company transfer that would take him away from South Africa. A Belgian woman who was struggling on a South African salary, was informed by a friend who was leaving South Africa that her job with a Belgian non-governmental organization (NGO) was going to become available before it had been advertised, so she could inquire in advance. A German woman described how her 20-year career in South Africa was facilitated by her social capital:

My best friend, who I had studied with in London at the LSE, who was American, [...and her Argentine partner] were both sitting at the [employer], running this research program and phoned me up and said, “We desperately need a researcher. Don't you want to come join us? We'll fiddle the [employer], kind of, recruitment process, so that we can hire you.” So there you go! A perfect example of how it works, right? [...] my contract just got renewed and extended and eventually made permanent and I was there. Then after my maternity leave, I chose to come back part-time and then consult. And I was largely consulting for the UN and the international NGOs, so, again, nationality was not an issue. And then, when I was fed up with that and decided, OK, I need a job – my one chance of getting hit with that – I applied for this job with [employer]

and the person who had the job before me and was essentially selecting her successor, was a white American. And she took one look at this thing and said, "OK, I recognize this, I think." You know, educational background, writing style, choosing to be here, all of those things. [...] She was like, "OK, here is somebody I can recognize." [...] I think [she] basically said, "Here, this is the person you need. You like me, she'll be another me." [Employer] said, "OK, fine." And that was that. Department of Labor doesn't come into that kind of suggestion. And then I got recruited out of that job by [current employer], who, [did the] same thing, [...] we got on so well, and we're essentially sort of clones of each other, or I'm like a mini-[her], essentially. So she said, "I'll hire you, it'll mess with my BBBEE but I'll do it anyway."

Thus, those participants who have progressed in the formal labor market are reliant on their social networks and social capital to bypass barriers for foreigners that seemingly arise when responding to publicized job vacancies. As a Belgian woman noted:

I'm scared to job hunt. That's [the] only thing I'm scared of. If I have to job hunt, it's not going to be easy, I think. [...] As a permanent resident, OK, but still, you're not a South African, not a black South African, and there's a thing you can't change much about.

Those participants for whom career progression was not dependent on formal employment, and who had acquired status through their relations, were enthusiastic about opportunities for (informal) entrepreneurship in South Africa. For instance, a British woman married to a South African said she knew she could "make a plan" when she arrived:

This has just been very organic, it's been word-of-mouth, people finding me, people speak to people, they come see me, and yeah, I'm in the process of formalizing [an arrangement]. But [I'm] enjoying that I didn't have to formalize before. In the UK, it would have been: I've got to have a company, gotta register, gotta, you know, all that kind of stuff that gives me the heebie-jeebies. Things here can be done a bit more informally.

European immigrants encounter obstacles in the formal labor market, but not in other areas where foreigners typically encounter bordering, such as health care and education. In general, European immigrants have the money – or employment package – to go for "private, parallel everything", as a German woman put it. A British man explained that "going private" takes you out of competition with South Africans:

I have never really had to access South African public sector resources. [...]

Other than the jobs I've been employed in, I've never been in a situation where one might say but you're taking an opportunity, or a place, or a resource away from a black South African who deserves it more. Private health care, private schooling, you know?

Not all European immigrants can afford private health insurance and some prefer not to spend their money that way. Nonetheless, several participants stated clearly that they would always avoid South African public hospitals. As a Belgian woman said after describing the experience of visiting a friend at a public hospital: "I was very clear in my head: I'll never be here. Then, I'll rather pay." A Luxembourgish man also "decided to just pay cash, [for] most of the things", but he also maintains his Luxembourg health insurance:

... for more complicated ... I mean, in the case of a surgery or something [...], because, I know, if something really bad happens and I'm not covered – that really goes into the hundreds of thousands of Rands, you know? So at least I know that I'm insured.

A Danish man also made the decision to save on the health insurance payments that were "eating" into his funds, with the idea that, "I can always take a flight back home. I don't have to go to hospital, as such." Thus, in different ways, European immigrants rely on their privileged access to funds, to European health systems and their international mobility to reduce their vulnerability to exclusion.

It is questionable whether European immigrants would face exclusion from public health care on the basis of their foreignness or lack of residence status. Especially white Europeans may experience privileged treatment in public health care facilities because of how they are perceived in the South African context. As a white, middle-class German woman described:

I did go and get a particular service at the local hospital, namely, my contraception. [...] And they would run because they assumed I was a sort of Department of Health monitor or somebody from the [employer] medical system that was checking on whether they knew how to do it right, as a sort of oversight thing, right? That would just be ... whether or not I said anything, I would just walk in and they would immediately ... I could just see that, in their heads, why else would this person possibly be here? She must be here to check on us. And therefore, we now have to provide the best service, so that bad things don't happen to us.

The power to "go private" is an economic freedom. The exchange rate from Euros or Pounds to Rand inflates Europeans' wealth in South Africa, so that even those who would struggle financially in Europe can live comfortably in South Africa.

Income or savings in hard currencies are a crucial aspect of strategies for navigating immigration, including facilitating ‘visa-runs’, overcoming exploitative sectors, hiring professional help with immigration procedures, and social security. For instance, a Belgian woman who grew tired of visa runs found a job that would secure her a visa but did not pay enough to cover her living costs, so she bought a house “with what I saved from home” so as not to lose money on rent, and she went back to work in Belgium for a few months so as to be able to afford a car and save on transport. For another example, a Danish artist without residence status in South Africa returns to Denmark at regular intervals to renew his South African visitor’s visa and to “collect some funds” to pay the rent on his studio in Johannesburg, by selling paintings for Euros. And a German woman explained that she was able to afford to pay fees to obtain a PhD from a UK university because she qualified for European part-time fees as a German national and enjoyed reduced living costs in South Africa.

Indeed, many participants demonstrated awareness of the fiscal advantage of having access to hard currencies and took steps to maintain funds in Europe, even if they were invested in living in South Africa long-term. A Belgian woman maintains a minimal amount in a Belgian bank account as an insurance (“a little pot”) for unexpected costs that a South African salary cannot cover, such as “if something happens to my parents, I want to be able to fly back”. A British man nearing retirement has invested in a property and a pension scheme in the UK – in addition to his property and pension scheme in South Africa – that “generates some sterling income so there’s some pounds sitting in a bank account that I use to run various expenses”. Describing his UK investments led him to raise his uncertainties about his future retirement in South Africa. A British woman also raised her British bank account in the context of maintaining a connection to the UK:

It’s quite funny how there is something about wanting to make sure that there is a kind of connection, I guess? Because, you know, I’ve got friends there, I’ve got, you know, I still pay my social security [...]. I still have a couple of bank accounts, I still keep my registration with the NHS going, I’m registered with an NHS dentist, you know, because I pay my thing so I don’t really, I don’t think I’m cheating the system, right? [...] just keeping some of those things going.

In sum, while European immigrants have felt the restrictive turn in South African immigration policy, as a German participant put it, “it’s like one continuous white privilege story, which is sort of the South African story, I suppose, the global story”. Europeans have significant unearned advantages in international migration: their passports grant them international mobility and access to territories; their access to European currencies, markets and resources ensures their relative wealth; and their networks are generally powerful (Leonard and Walsh, 2019). Furthermore, white Europeans in South Africa benefit from the presumption of their superior societal

positions. Europeans utilize their privilege to navigate formal and informal systems in South Africa. Thus, these advantages – and perceptions based on their outcomes – ensure Europeans an immigration experience to South Africa that is rarely violent and, in many ways, privileged.

### *Comparing Europeans to other immigrant groups*

Privilege is made more visible through comparison with non-privileged groups. As some have argued (Dube, 2018; Moyo et al., 2018) and South African participants demonstrated, the politicized and securitized ‘immigrant’ in South Africa is African. Many European participants described stressful immigration experiences, but went on to express awareness – in varying degrees – that they were nonetheless privileged in contrast with experiences of African immigrants. As one participant described,

I've got a colleague now who's Zimbabwean. Extremely... been here for many, many years, you know, super highly qualified. He's still on a work permit. His daughter, who's spent her entire life here, her permit in South Africa is fine, but her Zimbabwean passport expired. [...] So he was getting told that she would have to leave. And, you know, that then becomes incredibly stressful. Whereas those aren't the kind of stories I've ever heard from my network of Europeans.

A man who identifies as Ghanaian but only recently obtained a Ghanaian passport (so as to enter Ghana without a visa and work for the African Union), explained that, in South Africa, it is better for him to operate on his British passport:

That's the South African paradox: that it's easier to get in here as a Brit or an American, than as a black African from somewhere north of the Limpopo. If you're doing it officially, of course. [...] It's this idea that as a Brit ... you're coming here to contribute something and as a Ghanaian you're coming here to take away something. That's the, kind of, underlying sentiment behind it.

During the data collection period, in the winter of 2019, another outbreak of xenophobic violence in Gauteng Province grabbed headlines. No European participant had direct experience of xenophobic violence, but the outbreak came up as a topic of conversation in relation to their foreignness. The following quotes of European participants, from a white man, a white woman and a black man, respectively, illustrate how race, wealth and gender factor into indirect experiences of xenophobia:

I live in Hillbrow,<sup>4</sup> I'm not afraid of anyone. I can ... They're not going to do *me* any harm.

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<sup>4</sup> Inner-city neighborhood in Johannesburg, home to many immigrants.

I don't know if I want to stay here anymore ... it had a really big impact on me. [...] I felt like I'm not yet a target, but if they finish there, they'll come. And it was the first time that I felt – because I'm white, I'm a girl, I'm a woman, and I'm a foreigner ... so everything that you can be. When you come from Belgium, I have never been in the minority of a group and now I'm in everything the minority or the victim or ... so it was very confronting.

You know, if there's something happening in Braamfontein or Jeppestown<sup>5</sup> or whatever – we're in Rosebank,<sup>6</sup> 8-ft walls, electric fence, five dogs on the property, armed response – it doesn't really touch us. It may do one day. But to be honest – and I've said this to some South Africans, black South Africans in the ANC<sup>7</sup> – I said, "If they're coming for us in Rosebank, it's because they're coming for *you*. They've finally realized that we're not the problem, you are, and they're coming for you. [...] And when they do come to the rich suburbs, they're coming for everybody, they're coming for the rich," I'd say. So, no, the xenophobia thing hasn't really impacted us, physically.

Thus, as others have pointed out (Tewolde 2020), European immigrants' experience and general exemption from xenophobia is intertwined with their positions in South African society. Not all European immigrants experience privileges associated with being European. Which nationalities count as 'European' is also subject to geopolitical dynamics, which change over time. A Bulgarian man argued that his immigration experience is similar to that of African immigrants because of how he came to South Africa:

I was in my mid-20s to early-30s when it came in my mind to emigrate, because in Eastern Europe we had one social system, or one economical system, [...] and that system, it didn't work, it collapsed. So, but, exactly in this moment, when it collapsed, it has become like a turmoil, anarchy [...] let's say, my generation – we decided to go wherever, where you can live and have a decent way of living. You know, in dignity and prosperity. And I tried in different places and from a distance was always hard to obtain straightforward immigration permission, to call it, or to obtain a visa with which you can easily go and emigrate and settle down. [...] So what we did was, we bought as low as possible visa which you can use and you just go there, which is not very correctful [sic] wherever you go, because you jumped and you say, "OK, I want to stay here." [...] And I'm one of those guys who did this. I didn't want to do it, you need to have a little bit of courage [...] I haven't managed to go back because I haven't obtained any permanent status in South Africa still. [...] I think I'm not the only one. Not only Eastern Europeans. I would say I don't

<sup>5</sup> Inner-city neighborhoods in Johannesburg.

<sup>6</sup> A suburban neighborhood north of Johannesburg's city centre.

<sup>7</sup> African National Congress, the ruling party in South Africa since the first free elections in 1994.

think there is that huge difference between Eastern Europeans and African emigrants. Because they ... because as soon as you arrive here you have the same issues. You know. We have different issues *outside* of South Africa, ... but when we are here, we are emigrants, and we have the same, you know, to be adopted here and how to happen and what to happen [sic]. So that makes us one thing, a group of people with similar issues or yes, yeah ... the same problems.

However, he went on to report that he had never been targeted by police and associated this with how he is perceived and his association with white South Africans:

Not directly. Not brutally, not the way how some African people, some African emigrants already had an issue. [...] African immigrants had a severe issue with their own, South African-African people. [...] They can stop me, I'm not saying I've got immune[ity]. But no ... I'm fortunate, put it this way, I'm lucky. [...] The cops, they are aware, they know me. Not in person, but they know, they know that I'm productive. If they stop me, there's somebody who – from the local people – to protect me maybe. As long as I don't do anything wrong, they're comfortable with me, I think.

A Danish-German man and an Italian woman, after describing their administrative struggles and immigration strategies as being similar to those of many immigrants who live in their respective inner-city neighborhoods in Johannesburg, also pointed out policing as an important difference:

Here in Joburg, in the CBD,<sup>8</sup> we're all on the same level. Except some people are more leveled than others. For example, [African immigrants] are always very aware that the police are out to get them. They always have to have 50 rand handy, for bribes.

In terms of security, in terms of, you know ... I can easily walk and be OK. It's not the same for many [African immigrants]. You know, the cops stop them, it's a disaster, even if they've got the document. Cops don't stop me. Well, they do, but in Yeoville<sup>9</sup> they actually don't.

Even when European immigrants are stopped by police or other South African authorities, interactions are predominantly straightforward, privileged by nationality and race. One of the common scenarios in which European immigrants come into contact with South African police is when they are stopped by traffic officials and are asked to produce their driver's license. Many European participants, including

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<sup>8</sup> Central Business District, inner-city Johannesburg.

<sup>9</sup> An inner-city neighborhood in Johannesburg.

those who have lived in South Africa for over a decade, drive in South Africa on a European driver's license, even though they know that they are supposed to have an international or South African license. A German woman had "one little conversation about that" with a policeman on one occasion who, she suspected "had just been through some training or something", because:

... everyone else, as soon as they want to fine me and then I pull out the German license, they'll say: "Well, never mind. It's just too complicated. OK, just go away." [...] So it's a get-out-of-jail-free card.

A British woman suggested that she could just pretend she had just arrived in South Africa:

No one quite seems to know and [...] I kind of also, maybe, get a bit naughty, like, "Oh yeah, whatever, you know?" Which I wouldn't do in the UK, I would be much more by the book. Because I have to be. If I don't have to be, I won't.

Another British woman, who also feigned ignorance or accepted the minor fines, flagged that her race and nationality, as well as experience in the country, facilitate her interactions with police:

I think if I had a different skin color and a different passport it would potentially be different. I think I can joke my way out of things in a very different way.

Non-policing of Europeans is in dramatic contrast to experiences of (non-elite) African immigrants, who are routinely harassed with regard to their status, even when they have all the requisite papers and permits (Moyo and Nshimbi, 2020). As a Belgian woman married to a Nigerian man described:

[Any interactions with police?] No. I can't ... no. [Husband] gets stopped and asked, of course, but I don't. Yeah, [husband], they'll even look in his phone and what what, sometimes. Ah, it's crazy. [...] Because they'll say, "Ah, you're one of these internet fraud people." Like, because Nigerians are known for that. Then they start looking, [...] Ja, there you see the difference in treatment, obviously. He also *often* gets stopped, I *never* get stopped, I don't know why – but he gets stopped ... Anyway, he's got mostly a good way of dealing with them. And mostly it's just like a friendly encounter. Not always. Like, the last time, they searched his whole car, from top to bottom, thinking they will find drugs or something. But ne, they didn't find. It's like, we went once to emergencies with [husband] – anyway it doesn't have anything to do with papers but – he had such pain, here, in his stomach. [...] I had to go out when the doctor wanted to talk to him. Ja, afterwards I thought maybe they feel he's

my gardener or something, he doesn't know I'm his wife. I had never even thought, because I was stressed – then his thing was, he had an overdose of cocaine and he had a heart attack. [...] I'm like, "Heart attack? But you have pain in your stomach!" [...] And they did all these ECGs and what and yeah, we were waiting for a blood test, that's why we were there for hours, to get the results, to see the cocaine levels in his blood. Of course, there was nothing. Oh, yeah, it wasn't a heart attack. I'm like, "I could have told you that 4 hours ago and R7000 ago [...]" [You said it's nothing to do with papers, but then what is it?] Well, it's nationality. Well, yeah, it's based on nationality, no? Like, "Oh, he's Nigerian, so it's an overdose of cocaine. And he's got a heart attack." Ja, that was like ... He was a black doctor. So, you see the prejudices. Crazy.

In sum, the European participants often qualified and compared the immigration experiences of European immigrants with those of African immigrants. While people from both groups share common experiences of encountering exclusionary/nationalist administrative barriers, European immigrants are spared the violence of immigration enforcement, policing and xenophobia that African and other non-white immigrant groups regularly face, and demonstrate awareness of this difference.

#### DISCUSSION: PERCEPTIONS, REFLECTING AND SHAPING OUTCOMES OF PRIVILEGE

While immigration is often a stressful, frustrating and expensive experience, European immigrants rely on their privileges to find ways to pursue their aspirations in Johannesburg and, therefore, their struggles with status in South Africa are experienced as predominantly bureaucratic and administrative. The data presented in this paper demonstrates two types of privilege that Europeans have when immigrating to South Africa: the unearned advantage of European nationality (from birth) that grants privileged access to financial and social resources accumulated in and by European states through colonial and capitalist ventures, and the exceptional privilege of being spared the injustice of securitized exclusion on the basis of racialized identity and legal status. These privileges do not uniformly benefit all European immigrants as race, class and gender also play important roles. For instance, white and middle-class European nationals may benefit from better access to skilled employment, financial and social capital, and other resources than their black and working-class counterparts. Nonetheless, while not all individuals will reap benefits from their privileges – as exemplified by the Bulgarian man who has lived in limbo in Johannesburg for 22 years – the privileges nonetheless exist (Johnson, 2001) and, in the case of this participant, manifest in non-policing of his irregular presence in the country.

Beneficiaries of privilege tend to discount the experiences of those who suffer injustice and the structural conditioning of their unearned advantages (McIntosh, 1989), a syndrome described as 'white innocence' (Baldwin, 1963; Wekker, 2016).

Steyn (2018) describes the phenomenon as, ‘constructing innocence,’ a process that involves claiming ignorance of the atrocities that accompanied apartheid. She argues that white South Africans’ claim to innocence relieves them of any responsibility to forge relationships with the black population, cultivating persistent racial segregation. Despite enduring poverty and unemployment that is largely concentrated among blacks, Steyn (2018: 11) maintains that white South Africans reject accountability and discount their privilege by positioning themselves as victims, particularly of affirmative action. While the European participants demonstrated a similar ‘innocence,’ several – especially those who had integrated into mixed or black communities in South Africa – demonstrated awareness and understanding of privileges associated with their European passports and as European foreigners in contrast to other people in South Africa.

Outcomes of privilege reflect in perceptions among South Africans of European immigrants’ wealth, legality, skills, and contributions to South Africa. European immigrants are not problematized and are rarely associated with immigration in political debates. They are not associated with the figure of the migrant as law-breaking, poor, low-skilled, and driven by political and economic underdevelopment or persecution. They can pass for white South Africans and enjoy access to white spaces in Johannesburg, and also gain access to black South African communities and spaces because their foreignness distinguishes them from white South Africans. They are not perceived as a threat to the South African labor market and economy, but rather as a boon. The European participants reported no policing of their status and no violent experiences of xenophobia or policing, demonstrating sustained racialization of law enforcement and violence (Newham et al., 2006; Saucier and Woods, 2014; McKaiser, 2020) and illustrating how racial hierarchies manifest in European exceptionalism.

Bonds and Inwood (2016: 715-716) argue that in former settler colonies, white supremacy is the “animating logic of racism and privilege” that ensures not only “individual social conditions of whiteness,” but also the “enduring structures of white power”. We suggest that perceptions of European immigrants in Johannesburg are informed by white supremacy as well as the visible outcomes of unearned advantages. We argue that such privileged perceptions reproduce outcomes of white supremacy and further enhance European privileges in South Africa by affording them freedom from the political economy of violence of xenophobia (Misago, 2017), immigration enforcement and policing that target non-white foreigners.

Furthermore, European immigrants are not burdened by the trauma of, or culpability for, the apartheid regime – an added dimension of their privileged exceptionalism that expands their social capital and capability to access racialized and classed spaces in South Africa in ways that even nationals cannot. Instead, European immigrants benefit from the kind of global and social mobility previously associated with empire migration – the migration of Europeans around the world under colonial regimes (Harper and Constantine, 2010). Global and social mobility facilitate

European immigrants' access to employment in South Africa, which improves their chances of gaining status as well as their perceived desirability. Access to resources in Europe help them to overcome exploitative practices, job precarity, social insecurity and obstacles to employment, such as transport and formal qualifications of skills.

Recognition of European immigrants' 'skills' also derives from "gendered and racialized biases of existing approaches to skills definition" in immigration regimes (Boucher, 2020). One outcome of this is accessibility of privileged immigration pathways such as permits for 'critical' (previously 'exceptional') skills. Thus, European immigrants tend to enter into South Africa's primary or 'white' labor market sector (Cassim, 1982; Burger and Jafta, 2006), an outcome of their privilege which may influence perceptions about Europeans' superiority and further enhance European immigrants' position in the labor market and society in general. If "the desirability of immigrants has come to correspond to their rank in the labor market" (Ellermann, 2020), European immigrants benefit from colonial and apartheid legacies in South Africa's labor market, in which differentiated streams of migration are a central feature, "deliberately so engineered and structurally related" (Harper and Constantine, 2010: 5).

Anti-immigrant sentiments and violence against foreigners prevailing in contemporary South Africa are the subject of much debate. We argue that the discourse surrounding the exclusion of immigrants should also consider the privileges accompanying European immigration, that inform perceptions of their magnanimity and allow them to integrate into South Africa in ways that African immigrants especially are denied.

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