Afrophobic hypernationalism: Unpacking the anti-black logic of #PutSouthAfricansFirst

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Abstract
There is persistent xenophobia in South Africa and social media is used to promote negative stereotypes against migrant communities. The hashtag #PutSouthAfricansFirst expresses anger at the perception that foreigners are criminals and 'steal jobs' from locals. Social media is a dialogic site of micro- and macro meaning-making, identity formation, and ideological contestation. Online and offline communities are mutually constitutive, as intersecting discursive spaces that (re)produce, amplify, and resist nationalist discourse on the treatment of migrants and citizens. Using a reflexive, quasi-ethnographic approach, I conducted a critical discourse analysis of a related Twitter (X) discussion. I unpack these racialized utterances to understand their psychopolitical positioning within a context of enduring coloniality. I identify four intersecting discourses that prop up xenophobia: patriotic citizenship; law and order; localised marginality; and pre-colonial indigeneity. In a context of poverty, inequality, and unemployment, I argue that these discursive tensions contribute to a violent meta-discourse of 'Afrophobic hypernationalism', which locates itself within a historically divisive, anti-black ontology that perpetuates an apartheid-era logic, in which hierarchies of blackness are reinforced and discursively justified with great speed by anonymous social media communities.

Keywords
Afrophobia, coloniality, nationalism, social media, South Africa, xenophobia

Introduction

Rising xenophobia across South Africa intersects with diverse psychosocial, economic, historical, and political factors (Akinola, 2018). Cross-border migrants[1] are consistently the target of negative prejudice and stereotypes

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[1] There is unresolved practical and conceptual debate on terminology. I am opting to use the umbrella term 'migrant' (see UNDESA, 2020) to refer to all documented and undocumented foreign nationals, stateless people, refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants, from countries outside of South Africa currently residing in South Africa. The discourse in South Africa more often uses the term 'foreigners'.

(Gordon, 2015). In March 2019, President Cyril Ramaphosa launched the 'National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance'. Yet, anti-migrant attitudes flourish (Human Rights Watch, 2020), especially on social media (Mpofu & Barnabas, 2016; Lunga, 2021). In 2020, the hashtags #PutSouthAfricansFirst and #WeWantOurCountryBack expressed anger at rising unemployment and the perception that migrants 'steal' jobs from locals. Given South Africa's history of brutal violence towards migrants (Valji, 2003) and global anti-immigrant discourse (Kreis, 2017), these phrases were not innocuous expressions of frustration.

In keeping with a critical social justice orientation, and decolonial imperatives, some South African psychologists increasingly participate in these public debates, moving away from 'neutral' positions that prevent psychologists from taking public positions on controversial social issues. To disrupt this hegemony of 'neutrality', some psychologists – myself included – now speak beyond academia and engage actively in mainstream- and social media, in line with a critical psychology position that silence – in the context of injustices – is an act of violence itself (SR Pillay, 2016). Increasingly, the internet is "the scene of politics" and social media is its most accessible mode of engagement (Çetinkaya, 2020). There were 22 million active social media users by July 2020 in South Africa (37% of the population) (TalkWalker, 2020).

Within this context I chose to personally intervene on Twitter (now called *X*) by posting a brief critique[2] against xenophobia. I felt that a discourse to put South Africans 'first' and an interpellation into the bravado of ethno-nationalism would quickly translate into mob violence. Indeed, our "identitarian dysfunctionality" often manifests as "a uniquely South African hostility towards other African immigrants" (Lamola, 2018, p.72). I tweeted my misgivings on January 2, 2021. It read:

> #WeWantOurCountryBack and #PutSouthAfricansFirst reinforce a vocabulary of violence. These xenophobic, fascist, hyper-nationalist slogans drive lazy scapegoating of 'ethnic others'. History warns us what happens next.

Most replies were explicitly xenophobic and racist, fuelling a "discursive spiral of hate" that social media tends to evoke and enable (Kopytowska, Grabowski, & Woźniak, 2017, p.68). In this article, I offer a critical discourse analysis of this ensuing online discussion. I contend that this is a valuable mode and site of analysis for three reasons.

Firstly, there is a lack of autoethnographic approaches researching racism, xenophobia, and nationalism, due to the obstinate illusion of political neutrality. I am deliberately embedding myself into this analysis vis-à-vis my participation and provocations in the tweets under investigation, parting ways from existing scholarship on social media and prejudice that renders the researcher invisible (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). Insofar as an autoethnographic lens

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[2] As a micro-blogging app, a single tweet only allows 280 *characters*. Posts must therefore be succinct and catchy.

"lets you use yourself to get to culture" (Pelias, 2003, p.372), I explore the cultures of racism, xenophobia and nationalism that are amplified on Twitter. This disrupts supposedly 'objective' (conservative, mainstream) analytic frames, enabling a nuanced, embedded, situated political subjectivity in academia. Secondly, social media is a dialogic site of micro- and macro meaning-making, identity formation, and ideological contestation (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018). Online and offline communities are mutually constitutive (Bouvier, 2015), as intersecting discursive spaces that (re)produce, amplify, and resist nationalist discourse and political positions on the treatment of migrants and citizens. An analysis that explores these psychopolitical realities can improve our understanding of these layered and entangled sites of meaning-making (Kopytowska et al., 2017). Thirdly, I theorize the intersectional violence of racism, nationalism, xenophobia, patriarchy, and coloniality in South Africa, by proposing a model of 'Afrophobic Hypernationalism'.

(Re)Articulations of anti-black racism

> 'How did it come to pass that in the imagination of an African nation [South Africa], Africa and Africans represent the negativity of Otherness?' - Matsinhe (2011, p.298)

An obvious starting point for any analysis of social friction in South Africa is race. 'Race' haunts our lives despite the formal end of apartheid in 1994. 'Race trouble' naturalizes itself into daily discourse (Durrheim, Mtose & Brown, 2011). Our failure – or resistance – to evolve from, or undo, colonial categories of racialised subjectivity has left us without exit points to make sense of our identities (Maré, 2014). Despite disrupting white political rule, post-1994 life has achieved neither its early romantic notions of racial reconciliation, nor its pragmatic plans of black economic empowerment. Almost three decades later, the inscription of black poverty as a normative condition of black existence reinforces the anti-black ontology of colonialism and apartheid. Khanyile (2019, p.2) offers an apt provocation:

> I would like to persuade you to consider the possibility that we, Black and Brown people, living in South Africa today are not living in a post-apartheid society. We are living, instead, in an advanced stage of economic and racial domination that began in 1652 shortly after the arrival of Jan Van Riebeeck in the Cape.

Drawing on the work of Anthony Borges' theory of how repetitive historical trauma creates catastrophic social, bodily, and psychic wounds, Khanyile (2019) argues that these wounds have warped the identities of Black and Brown[3] people in South Africa, rupturing and perverting relationships with each other. Despite a post-1994 discourse of 'freedom', he asks, "Why though, do our historical

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[3] Brown includes South Africans classified as Coloured (mixed race) and of Indian/Eastern/Asian ancestry. Both these 'Brown' categories have complex sociohistorical genealogies and are used, contested, (re)constructed, and problematized in multiple ways.

wounds still gape and ache and our scabs itch as if we are still living under the sword of racial domination?" (p.7).

When black citizens gained political power in South Africa through the democratic election of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1994, the 'new' nation-state emerged as a proud symbol of collective black identity and as an opportunity to speak back to- and resist coloniality. With Nelson Mandela as president, his globally iconic status ushered in a discourse of exceptionalism, to distinguish 'us' from 'other' failed post-colonial countries (Matsinhe, 2011). This optimistic feeling of political security shifted our collective gaze outwards, beyond our borders, in search of new threats. Through this paranoid turn, people who threatened the quasi-stability and quasi-freedoms of our promising nation-state were constructed as the new enemy[4] (see Neocosmos, 2010, for a detailed account of this state-driven discourse of nationalist exclusivism).

Nyamnjoh (2006, p.1) argues that the anxieties of globalisation also catalysed "an obsession with citizenship and belonging and the re-actualization of boundaries through xenophobia". Ironically, the hegemony of whiteness and its invisible economic power meant that the objects of this paranoia became the *obviously visible*: displaced black Africans fleeing Other[5] countries. As coloniality at work, this anti-black self-hatred reinscribed *die swart gevaar*[6]. Amusan and Mchunu (2017, p.10) note:

> Caucasian foreigners are perceived and accepted as 'tourists' and 'investors' who have everything positive to offer South Africa, while African foreigners are perceived and rejected as 'makwerekweres', 'throw-aways' and *personae non gratae…*

Despite Africa's collective wounding from colonialism and warnings from Fanon (1964) and Biko (1978) about the dangers of fragmentation amongst black people, the nervous conditions of 'post' apartheid life favoured paranoia instead of solidarity. The foundational myth of a 'rainbow nation' became a discursive proxy for an emboldened ethno-nationalist identity (Valji, 2003). Symbolic boundary-making became interwoven with social identity. These psychosocial arrangements were iterations of positive ingroup bias and outgroup hostility, seen routinely in the social psychology of intergroup relations. As many African countries struggled to achieve stability, erupting into civil wars, violent tribalism, or financial collapse, thousands of Africans fled their home countries and came into ours, as a matter of survival, to benefit from the opportunities being created by the influx of global capital into the 'new' South Africa. Compared to 49.6 million South Africans, two million migrants were recorded in the 2011 census, most being black African (71.7%), mostly from Zimbabwe and Mozambique, and 4.2% of Asian ethnicity, mostly from Pakistan and Bangladesh (Statistics

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[4] Scholars like Biney (2018) attempt to curb historical amnesia, by writing about the role African countries played in the anti-apartheid struggle.

[5] I deliberately capitalize Other to signify the *othering* processes in our construction of *other Africans*, i.e., those who are not South African.

[6] *Die swart gevaar* is an Afrikaans term for 'the black danger' – a phrase used during apartheid to describe racist fears and anxieties felt by white South Africans towards black South Africans.

SA, 2012)[7]. This created a perfect storm: a context wherein historically wounded black South Africans with new psychosocial and political power, encountered a group of wounded Others without such power. Post-1994, Congolese and Nigerian migrants complained that South Africans "make our lives hell" (Morris, 1998, p.1116). A new hierarchy emerged – one which stratified black Africans based on nationality, ironically maintaining an anti-black ontology.

South Africa soon developed the highest rate of anti-immigration bias in the world (Mattes et al., 1999) and during 2003–2012, African nationals were consistently identified as the most undesirable migrants, with Nigerians being most disliked (Gordon, 2015). For these reasons, some scholars theorize South Africa's brand of xenophobia as Afrophobia (Lamola, 2018), to enunciate the particular prejudice against black Africans[8] – an easy target for misplaced "pent up anger and frustration" at continued poverty (Wilson & Magam, 2018, p.103).

Afrophobia fuels anti-black prejudice against African migrants as a divisive colonial continuity. Grosfugel (2004, p.325) is instructive here when he argues that "there is no 'post' in colonial/racial hierarchies in the world today. Instead, there are cultural and political processes that reproduce a 'colonial situation' without the presence of a 'colonial administration'". He argues such continuities are "not fundamentally about skin colour but about a location within a colonial relationship" because "social power today is still informed by criteria built over a long colonial history" (Grosfugel, 2004, p.328). Such prejudices by black South Africans against black African nationals reproduce this colonial anti-black ontology, repurposing racist hierarchies from colonialism and apartheid.

Afrophobic myths

A common stereotype is that 'foreigners steal our jobs'. South African news media fuel these moral panics (Banda & Mawadza, 2015; Moyo & Mpofu, 2020) and are used in electioneering by political parties such as the Patriotic Alliance. However, Chaskalson's (2017) analysis refutes this Afrophobic myth. Using the 2011 census data, his regression models show that migrants are *creating* jobs at the lower levels (e.g., as cleaners, labourers, factory workers), albeit at tiny percentages. However, as the level of skill or education needed for a job increases, migrants may be preferred in some sectors, such as sales, services, and other professional industries (again, at only between 0.03 – 0.1%). More often, migrants are entrepreneurial.

In a study in Cape Town, Kalitanyi and Visser (2010) found that 82% of 120 African migrants *employ* South Africans in their businesses and transfer entrepreneurial skills to their South African employees. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor South Africa (GEM SA) 2019/2020 report found that business ownership rates increased from 2.2% in 2017 to a mere 3.5% in 2019, far below the average for other African countries and developing nations. Vandor

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[7] Updated census statistics were released while this paper was in press. See StatsSA (2023).
[8] Others have challenged this hypothesis (e.g., Freeman, 2020; Tewolde, 2019) or called for a more nuanced analysis (e.g., Dube, 2018). For the purposes of this article, Afrophobia makes conceptual sense.

and Frank (2016) suggest that "public money may be better spent on building incubators for migrant entrepreneurs than on building border walls". Unsurprisingly, we rank 119 out of 141 in terms of the quality of our education system, according to the Global Competitiveness Index 2019/2020. The South African 2011 census data also shows that although migrants and locals have similar years of schooling, more migrants have a tertiary education compared to locals (Chaskalson, 2017). Despite these statistics, Afrophobic myths endure, cause mental distress amongst migrants (Thela et al., 2018) and erupt into acts of physical violence.

Inequality, desperation and violence

The gruesome lynching of Mozambican national, Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave, symbolizes the atrocities endorsed by Afrophobia, which flared up like raging wildfire in May 2008. Nhamuave was stabbed, beaten, and set alight by South African men in a township called Ramaphosa, in Gauteng province. Over 60 people were killed, including locals, and 100 000 people displaced in two weeks (Hassim, Kope & Worby, 2008). Photographs of "the burning man" stain our collective memory and remove any illusions of exceptionalism propped up by nationalist mythologies. Hopes for an inclusive 'rainbow' citizenship – as promised in our progressive Constitution – were all but shattered (Mupotsa & Kreutzfeldt, 2016).

However, violence is often an expression of economic desperation in South Africa, which holds the notorious label of being the most unequal country in the world (UNDP, 2014). Swiftly betrayed by broken political promises, alienated black citizens are understandably frustrated: 49.2% of the country lives in poverty (Statistics SA, 2015), wealth remains firmly racialized and dominated by a white minority (Anwar, 2017), and unemployment is at 42% (Stats SA, 2020a). Afrophobic violence – discursive and physical – can be located within this matrix of colonial continuities that keep most black South Africans stuck in contexts of desperate hopelessness.

This inequality fuels hostile inter-group relations (Mamabolo, 2015) and our crime levels bear testament to this: between April 2019 and March 2020, there were 21 325 reported murders, 18 635 attempted murders, 53 293 sexual offences, 165 494 assaults, 51 825 common robberies, 59 883 cases of shop lifting, 46 921 vehicle robberies, and 205 595 burglaries at people's homes (SAPS, 2020). With a murder rate of 35.8 per 100 000 population, interpersonal violence also shapes processes of identity formation (Judge, 2018).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa shed 671 000 jobs (-6,6%) in June 2020 compared with June 2019 (Statistics SA, 2020b). Between the first and second quarter of 2020, the number of employed persons decreased by 2,2 million, causing a 2.3% higher unemployment rate of 42% and a youth unemployment rate of 55% (Statistics SA, 2020b).

Yet, South Africa remains a relatively attractive destination for migrants. Recent reports estimate that 4.8% of South Africa's population are migrants (i.e.,

2.8 million people at a median age of 34) (UNDESA, 2020). The majority of immigrants are male and young adults aged 20–44 (Statistics SA, 2023). Political stability, better socioeconomic opportunities relative to Other African countries, temperate geographic climate, porous borders, and a progressive Constitution and Bill of Rights, epitomizes a country of paradoxes: of poverty and possibility. However, Afrophobia – like coloniality and racism – is discursively resilient and mutated onto social media in 2020 under the hashtag #PutSouthAfricansFirst. This became the tenth most trending phrase by July 2020, with 414 400 mentions across varied social media, according to TalkWalker.com, a private company that tracks social media trends. By comparison, the number one most trending phrase was # COVID19, with 1.3 million mentions (TalkWalker, 2020).

Against this socio-historical background I return to my initial Tweet and the online reaction it generated, as this forms the central pivot of my inquiry. The explicit – even proud – Afrophobia, racism, and echo chamber of rage provoked by my post is an exemplar of the discursive hate that often precedes physical violence. As a point of inquiry, my aim was to explore the discourses informing these utterances and understand their positioning within a context of coloniality.

Methods

Design and data collection

This was a retrospective, quasi-ethnographic, naturalistic observation study of digital discourse on Twitter, a publically accessible social media platform. The dataset was a discussion thread I generated by critiquing the #PutSouthAfricansFirst hashtag. The Tweet had a modest reception. By March 2, 2021, the tweet was seen by 14 485 people and had 771 engagements, including 33 retweets, 71 likes, and 34 replies. At this point, two months later, all engagement had stopped and I formally saved the responses for analysis.

Data analysis

In keeping with a social constructionist epistemological position, I used a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to analyse the data. CDA focuses on the "semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, abuse, and political-economic or cultural change in society" and unpacks how language is used to construct particular social realities and inequalities as self-evident, thereby (re)producing relations of power and self/other (re)presentations (Fairclough, Mulderrig & Wodak, 2011, p.357). By focusing on a single discussion thread, it enabled an interactional but contextualised account of how identities and positionalities come to be discursively constructed in emotionally contested online communities (Bouvier, 2015).

Ethics

The ethics of this study is embedded in a range of uneven power dynamics afforded to me by my intersecting positions as participant/observer, researcher, and author. Ethical tensions arose as I made inferences, assumptions, and value-judgments about the data. I imagine that some Twitter users may have reservations about their tweets coming under scrutiny, despite them freely engaging in a public platform whose very purpose is to solicit observation and attention. Given the heated public exchange that took place, my 'final' position as author(ity) renders this analysis in need of continuous reflexivity, despite using data in a public domain.

Reflexivity

The choice of focusing in depth on a single Twitter exchange that I had personally started, and I am embedded and implicated in, renders my own identity and politics pertinent. This autoethnographic gaze foregrounds constructions of (my)self and its entangled interactions with others within a socio-historical context. Self-reflexivity, despite its ability to enrich a CDA, is missing in most research on racism and social media (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). I offer some reflections on how others who may not personally know me could potentially have 'read' my online identity when engaging with me.

I am a South African cisgender man of historical Indian ancestry (fourth generation, born and raised in South Africa) and would be easily 'raced' as Indian based on my full name and picture on Twitter. My profile has a 'blue tick', showing others that Twitter has verified me as a real person (this was prior to blue ticks being a purchasable commodity). I had about 5000 'followers'. I self-described as a psychologist and researcher living in Durban. People could correctly estimate my age and could position me as middle class based on my profession and related assumptions. One could Google my name if they wanted to know more. My politics are therefore accessible to anyone wanting to engage further. I am not a 'blank slate' but my online identity is curated as professional. The option to directly message is available for private dialogue. Against my own background of writing and voicing socio-political commentary in the media for over 15 years, I have developed a 'thick skin' for public criticism, and I am not easily incited or triggered by provocative feedback, discerningly choosing the types of public dialogue I consider valuable. However, given the subject matter and the politics of difference across a greatly unequal society, my socio-economic privilege cautioned me to proceed with "methodological humility" (Narayan, 1988, p.37).

Findings

I identify and discuss four intersecting discourses that are embedded in the data: (1) patriotic citizenship, (2) law and order, (3) localised marginalities, and (4) pre-colonial indigeneity. I demonstrate and argue, overall, that these discursive tensions contribute to an emerging meta-discourse of 'Afrophobic hypernationalism'.

(1) Patriotic citizenship

A dominant response to my critique of #PutSouthAfricansFirst was for respondents to (re)frame the hashtag as nationalistic duty and pride, drawing on a discourse of patriotic citizenship to counter accusations of xenophobia. In this brief exchange, a user called 'Wisani' who self-describes as 'A Patriotic South African and A Humanist' bemoans the constraints placed on him for expressing his patriotism, supported by Tshepo and Alunamda[9].

> **Wisani:** You see SAns. Being a patriot in your own Country is illegal. Very Sad!!
> **Author:** Patriotism and xenophobia are two different things.
> **Wisani:** but you people seem to confuse the two words
> **Tshepo:** Patriotism puts citizens first
> **Alunamda:** That is very much clear. Seems like you are the one who had difficulty understanding the two

Wisani's interpellation of South Africans ("You see SAns") serves to distance my identity as a South African – despite writing in direct reply to my tweet, he does not address his reply to me, and in his second response refers to me as "you people". This Othering effect constructs me as outside citizenship, given my perceived lack of patriotism (or, as I later discuss, based on the precarity of Indian identity in South Africa). By discursively revoking my right to speak as a citizen, Wisani uses my Tweet to decry how "being a patriot" is "illegal" – an ironic attempt to reconstruct my criticism as a violation of *his* legal right to freedom of expression. When I point out that patriotism and xenophobia are "two different things" he counters with the exact criticism, that I am confusing "the two words". Alunamda supports him and Tsepho offers a definition of patriotism that "puts citizens first" – implying that citizens are not currently prioritized. Wisani's defeatist expression of "Very sad!!" is an affective strategy drawing on a cultural politics of emotion (Ahmed, 2004), accentuating emotional attachments to nationalism. Lefa attempts a similar strategy:

> **Lefa**: Mr.Pillay, you should not be opposing this campaign. You should be a part of it as a patriot. Your sympathies are misplaced

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[9] All tweets have been reposted verbatim, with spelling, formatting, and grammar errors, etc. to preserve the ethnographic element of this investigation. Where some clarity is needed, it is corrected for in parentheses.

By inviting me to join "this campaign" as "a patriot", Lefa is clarifying the limits of where a patriot's "sympathies" must lie, by suggesting that my emotional positioning alongside migrants is "misplaced" and therefore unpatriotic. A discursive binary is constructed between sympathetic, supportive patriots (citizens) and unsympathetic, oppositional traitors (non-citizens). Read in isolation, it may appear that Lefa is at least addressing me as a fellow South African, but as I later show, Lefa's strategy includes a paradoxical mix of racist exclusion and ethno-nationalist inclusion. Defiantly, some people called themselves "proud xenophobes" and made no attempt to reframe their feelings as misunderstood patriotism.

> **Blizzard**: Was watching this documentary on Al Jazeera ryt now about Hungarians they too are tired of immigrants from Germany, Russia etc and nobody calls them xenophobic
> **Author**: Yeah, people rarely see xenophobia, tribalism, racism, etc. for what it is until its too late. Germany, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Cambodia, Myanmar, Kashmiri… The list is endless.
> **Blizzard**: You tell us what it is then. We don't care anymore we are proud xenophobes

Blizzard's comments are unsurprising and capture the localized iterations of a global phenomenon. Unquestioning patriotism has become a major dividing line in political discourse around the world. For example, there are similarities with the phrase #PutSouthAfricansFirst and #AmericaFirst – the latter being the official foreign policy position of the United States under Donald Trump, and the theme of both his presidential campaign and his inaugural address in 2016. Trump's use of Twitter as his primary means of public communication is implicated in bolstering his "politics of debasement" (Ott, 2017). Indeed, if the medium *is* the message (McLuhan, 1967), the rise of anti-immigrant propaganda cannot be separated from the immediacy and ubiquity of Twitter. Trump's explicitly xenophobic and isolationist approach to American nationalism was fuelled by a hyper-instant social media platform that imperialised global political discourse, as more and more countries retreated into itself by reasserting their borders and identities – seen dramatically after the 2016 Brexit vote and the UK's authoritarian turn (Webber, 2021). A discourse of patriotic citizenship therefore finds fertility in xenophobic utterances and right-wing rhetoric, exemplified by Trump's ideological peers such as India's Narendra Modi, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, Slovenia's Janez Janša, Turkey's Recep Erdoğan, Russia's Vladimir Putin, and – as Blizzard implies – Hungary's Viktor Orbán. Patriotism intersects with and feeds off this swelling language of nationalism (and fascism) desperate for oxygen (Roy, 2020). I refer to this as *hypernationalism*.

One respondent, Kedi, rebuked me for not doing my "research" and posted news headlines to defend this hypernationalism: "British jobs for British workers"; "2021 Budget: We will put Nigerians first, says Gbajabiamila"; "Zimbabwe tops number of arrested foreign nationals in Joburg"; and a picture of a man holding a "Ghanaians first" placard. These articulations draw on a global

anti-migrant discourse, with anti-black particularities in Africa: Nigeria and Ghana oppose migration from neighbouring African countries, and Kedi focuses on Zimbabwean criminals – despite pervasive criminality in South Africa (SAPS, 2020).

(2) Law and order

Tebogo (self-described as 'Patriot') constructs patriotism as protecting legal citizens from illegal migrants and frames the #PutSouthAfricansFirst movement as necessary for restoring law and order in the country.

> **Tebogo**: Label each & everyone of us xenophobic. That title no longer scares us or will make us submit. We will no longer allow privileged individuals to talk down or "manage" us & the realities of millions of SAns who realise our country is under invasion. Illegal immigration is a crime.
> **Author**: What's your plan?
> **Tebogo**: Replace the ANC government with a government that has the necessary political will to enforce South Africa's immigration and labour laws. It's really that simple. There is nothing xenophobic with pointing out that these illegal immigrants are in reality economic migrants. Or?

Tebogo's assertion that "Illegal immigration is a crime" foregrounds a discourse of criminality that affects the "realities of millions of [South Africans]". He writes that if government lacks "political will", then citizens must "Replace the ANC government". "It's really that simple" tries to reduce complexity into a single-issue problem, i.e., a weak government unable to implement its own "immigration and labour laws". Tebego's frustration at the ruling political party, the African National Congress (ANC), expresses disappointment that social and political power did not translate into economic power for black South Africans (Statistics SA, 2015). The ANC is now at its weakest point since 1994, with only 57.5% of voter share. Widespread corruption, poor policy implementation, and the "moral rot" of the ANC (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2013) has contributed to this. Ironically, Tebogo's "simple" plan to "replace the ANC" ignores his scapegoating of "illegal immigrants" – an easy target for misplaced "pent up anger and frustration" (Wilson & Magam, 2018, p.103). This frustration is felt in Dimpho's short tweet:

> **Dimpho**: South Africa is not a Banana Republic… LAW & ORDER!!!!

Lefa reframes xenophobia as a will to eradicate lawlessness, due to a lackluster government.

> **Lefa**: For the record, #PutSouthAfricaFirst challenges the rampant lawlessness effected by foreigners and allowed by gvt. Is that not a worthy cause? Are we not suffering enough as Africans as a result of terrible African leadership? What you see in this thread is no fluke. Its real

Lefa expresses a politics of pain and suffering by asking "Is that not a worthy cause? Are we not suffering enough…?" by implying that "rampant lawlessness" is a result of foreign criminality and government ineptitude. He adds to Tebogo's disillusionment with the ANC. The claim that "terrible African leadership" is responsible for the continued suffering of African citizens draws on Fanonian theory that anti-colonial movements morph into post-colonial agents of oppression, having internalized the anti-black logic used by colonial authorities (Fanon, 1964). Lefa went on to post nine news articles, screenshots, and videos of African migrants allegedly involved in illegal activities, including accusations that illegal migrants use fake Identity Documents (IDs) to get low-wage jobs in restaurants. Migrant criminality is propped up by bias-confirming examples of job-stealing Africans, a common Afrophobic stereotype despite counterevidence (Chaskalson, 2017).

Tebogo's war metaphor ("our country is under invasion") intersects with fears of losing jobs *and* the nation-state to migrants. Gqola (2008, in Hassim et al., 2008) draws attention to the aggressively patriarchal nature of xenophobia and its intersections with masculinist violence, as expressed here through military discourse. This discursive maneuver serves two functions: it creates an image of an invading enemy trespassing on our national sovereignty, threatening law and order, and it inversely deploys a discourse of foreign criminality as justification for violence to protect the nation-state from these imagined enemies – if we are "under invasion" then violence is permitted under war conditions. This aspect of hypernationalism is fear-based: aggressively driven by nationalist anxieties of losing control ("lawlessness") and local anxieties of losing material resources like jobs to "economic migrants". A discourse of law and order helps citizens like Tebogo, Dimpho, and Lefa to gain agency and power over these problems.

Returning to Tebogo's initial discursive move ("We will no longer allow privileged individuals to talk down or 'manage' us"), he strategically excludes me from the "millions of [South Africans]" affected by foreign criminality and rescripts me as an outgroup of "privileged individuals". The discursive binary of oppressed insiders and privileged others draw a dividing line of class and location to separate those who are perceived to be affected by foreign criminality and those who are not. In so doing, a discourse of law and order intersects with a discourse of localized marginality.

(3) Localised marginality

Some people expressed a position of unique disadvantage and despair constructed as experientially out of reach for people perceived to be unaffected by migrants.

> **Wisani**: I see that many people misunderstand our movement #PutSouthAfricanFirst but its fine. Let us be steadfast and protect our beloved nation […] stop trying to villify a movement that speaks for the marginalized South African

Wisani demarcates *"our* movement" and *"our* beloved nation" with socio-economic boundaries. A discourse of patriotism intersects with a discourse of localized marginality. In the latter, citizens are included in the logic of hypernationalism as a precarious, *classed* patriotism insofar as they are *"the marginalized* South African". Like Tebogo's assertion in the previous section that "privileged individuals" cannot understand the "realities" of the suffering majority, these discursive tactics construct critics – like me – as lacking the moral and epistemic authority to have an opinion about migrants because I am not "marginalized".

> **Ekhaya**: Tweeting from a point of privilege tends to obscure reality. South Africans are unemployed and state resources are uncertain stretched because of the influx of foreigners, not all can afford medical aide like your privileged self. Keep hiding in your own jail with highwalls
> **Bra Bob**: [Author name], the height of arrogance is trying to discredit a cause simply because it's objectives don't benefit you personally. Illegal immigration doesn't affect you negatively because you live in a gated community, allow those who are affected space to Adress it
> **MaNdosi**: Listen we don't care about what you and your views. We are the ones who live with these people not you ! You live behind high walls and probably hire them so you can exploit them. You probably go to malls and not to cbd so just keep your mouth shut !

Several racial, geographic and class divisions inform these tweets, creating a dividing line between those who experience (a particular) "reality" and those who "obscure reality". Ekhaya dismisses my tweet as rooted in a "point of privilege" that cannot comprehend marginality. Unemployment and poor access to healthcare is blamed on "the influx of foreigners" that stretches "state resources", drawing on Tebogo's earlier depictions of a country "under invasion". This epistemic tension works to exclude universalizing opinions from privileged outsiders. Constraints are placed on the possibilities of who can access knowledge about the material effects that immigration has on the lives of *marginalized* South Africans. The implication here is that "those who are affected" by migrants – via common physical and social spaces – have a grassroots view, perhaps what Narayan (1988, p.31) called "an epistemic privilege of the oppressed" as insiders to a particular experience that I – as a presumed outsider – do not have epistemic access to.

This discourse is accomplished by respondents using the "gated community" as a symbol of middle-class privilege and epistemic disavowal. Drawing on Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia as a disturbing space of otherness, a world within a world, Hook and Vrdoljak (2002, p.199) explore and critique the rise in gated communities in post-1994 South Africa as spatio-discursive dualities in which "already powerful class and race divisions are reinscribed in concrete terms, in barred-off roads, unpassable walls, electrified fences, booms and razor-wire". MaNdosi's point that "We are the ones who live with these people not you" asserts a geopolitics of proximity embedded in a

raced and classed social (dis)order. These enduring urban spatial divisions reinscribe apartheid-era housing, land, and transport inequities (influencing choices of going to "malls" versus "cbd"/central town) that are intimately linked to socio-economic transformation and safety. These exist in the nexus of crime, violence, fear, and social exclusion that impact urban development (Landman & Schönteich, 2002). Insofar as poverty limits democratic freedoms, Ekhaya describes securitized residential zones as prisons divorced from "reality", thereby flipping assumptions about a "privileged self" by constructing economic privilege as an ironic curtailment of freedom (a "jail with highwalls").

Indeed, I do live in a private, suburban complex with electric fencing and 24-hour security guards. I have secure employment and my own car. Bra Bob's accusation that "illegal immigration doesn't affect you negatively" is perhaps true. I cannot think of many situations where I have explicitly and personally been disadvantaged because of migrants. My "sympathies" – critiqued earlier by Lefa – are partly routed through positive experiences with refugees in a community psychology partnership and in my job in [organisation] wherein I encounter psychosocial oppression every day, affecting both locals and migrants. Nevertheless, I am on the epistemic margins of migrant communities and poorer South Africans directly affected by such migration, despite my personal, political, and professional attempts at working across and with such differences (Narayan, 1988).

(4) Pre-colonial indigeneity

My name and photo on Twitter 'race' me as person of Indian ancestry within the logic of South African racial classification. Several responses to my tweet were explicitly racist and leveraged a discourse of localized marginality to bolster a cruder wave of anti-Indian racism. This was a paradoxical strategy to defend a cause by turning *against* certain citizens. I opt to use the term *pre-colonial indigeneity*[10] to describe this racist discourse, because it is underwritten by a fantasy that romanticizes a return to an original, pre-colonial country inhabited by its indigenous peoples. Although the comments are crudely racist, to frame them entirely *as* racism would be to miss the socio-historical genesis of this prejudice. Several extracts are needed to fully illustrate this point.

One reply came from General Mike. 'He'[11] described himself as a "radical activist" from Midrand, Gauteng province. His profile pictures included a South African flag in the shape of a heart, and a soldier holding a gun. He responded to my Tweet at 11.30pm, a few hours after my original post.

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[10] See Neocosmos (2010) for an alternative analysis of how the imagination of citizenship as indigeneity has its historical roots in the apartheid-era migrant labour system, whose dismantling ironically created the conditions for post-apartheid xenophobia.

[11] I am making assumptions based on the pseudonym but could be wrong. Likewise, almost all racist comments directed at me came from Twitter users with names and pictures that imply they were black South Africans, but it is impossible to know for sure, but can be reasonably assumed when the thread of replies is looked at it in its entirety.

> **General Mike**: Go to hell. Who do you think you are? You should be concentrating on the Christmas curry left overs. We don't expect to be questioned by Koolies in our land[12].

Coolies – correctly spelt – is a racist slur with a history of being used to dehumanize people of Indian ancestry, including the ±152 000 indentured Indians shipped to South Africa in the 1860s by British colonialists (Hughes, 2007; K Pillay, 2017). It is obviously hurtful to be called a coolie – in as much as it goes without saying that using the K-word against black South Africans or the N-word against African Americans would be unacceptable. General Mike's reference to "Christmas curry leftovers" invokes stereotypes about Indian food, and the use of "We" and "our land" asserts the imagined boundaries of inclusion and exclusion within a hypernationalist logic. The fact that "Coolies" were lured into this country to work the land as agricultural labourers, and that land dispossession is a colonial driver of contemporary poverty and existential angst, underscores the affective significance of the phrase "in our land". Others keenly supported him.

> **Kholwani**: Shut up and go back to India you fucking coolie! […] These coolies are fucking parasites!
> **Patriotic**: Go home chief… South Africa is very xenophobic and if you're uncomfortable with that you can leave but you won't leave because you're enjoying the fruits of South Africa..We can see you're a double agent when it comes to nationality you swing in two different directions" […] Fake South African
> **Nelly Ngwenya**: You have dropped your brain after you crossed so many seas to come and reside in South Africa. The spices and banana have replaced your brain now you should go back where you came from. As an origin South African I want my country back from aliens. #WeWantOurCountryBack

These comments foreground the precarity of nationality. Despite most South African Indians being fourth or fifth generation citizens and making up ±2.6% of the national population (1.5 million people), we suffer contested identities, with national loyalties frequently called into question. "Go back to India", "Go home", "You can leave", "Fake South African", and "Go back where you came from" all resist the inclusion of Indians as bona fide citizens with a local heritage and lineage, foregrounding links to colonial India instead. I am constructed as foreign and my critique of xenophobia is interpreted as self-serving, because I am seen as "a double agent" with dual loyalties and the option of living somewhere else.

These politics of place-identity and belonging are rooted in historical separations, tensions, and resentment between black and Indian South Africans (Hughes, 2007). The divide and conquer logic of coloniality deliberately fueled animosity amongst the oppressed majority, with tensions often erupting between Indian and black citizens in KwaZulu-Natal province. Lefa uses Gandhi as an exemplar of these divisions.

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[12] This tweet was reported and subsequently removed by Twitter for violating its guidelines.

Lefa: Now here is a man of Indian descent who should swear by the preachings of Mahatma Ghandi, the same Ghandi who fought for Indian rights exclusively & rejected the African as kaffirs (the unholy); Oh my, how history repeats itself in the most obscure of ways? I am lost for words
**Author**: Why should I swear by Gandhi?
Lefa: Oh, so you don't appreciate the stereotyping you slavishly dish to South Africans who oppose the swamping of their country by illegal immigrants when it is directed at you?

Gandhi, an Indian lawyer and activist, stayed in South Africa between 1893 – 1914 and became a leader for indentured Indians, fighting against racist and colonial laws. However, despite global acclaim, his legacy during British colonialism reveals an ambiguous figure whose anti-black opinions fractured historical relationships between local Indians and local black Africans in then Natal (Desai & Vahed, 2016). Lefa draws upon these conceptions of Gandhi-the-racist in his efforts to homogenize all Indians. Lefa's phrasing that I am stereotyping "*South Africans* who oppose the swamping of *their* country" tries to discursively distance me from citizenship by constructing me as outside the nation-state, a perpetual migrant (K Pillay, 2016).

Historical anger and wounds about unfair access to land, codified in the racist Glen Grey Act of 1894 and the Natives Land Act of 1913, contour contemporary relations between black and Indian South Africans. This discourse, a romanticised desire for pre-colonial life, is therefore linked to the growing impatience around land redistribution, because land ownership is seen as a means of undoing the racialized spatial asymmetries and inequities caused by centuries of property dispossession (United Nations Development Programme, 2014; Neves, 2006). Land is deeply and intimately intertwined with a sense of place, space, and identity, which is further entangled with notions of inclusion/exclusion and insiders/outsiders. A discourse of pre-colonial indigeneity is therefore a primal longing for stolen land, despite its racist articulation.

Towards a discursive model of Afrophobic Hypernationalism

I propose that an emerging meta-discourse of 'Afrophobic Hypernationalism' may help us understand how and why South African citizens express anti-migrant sentiments on social media. These articulations, foremost, be located as manifestations of colonial continuities rooted in a historically divisive anti-black ontology. I summarize the four contributing discourses to this model (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. A discursive model of Afrophobic Hypernationalism
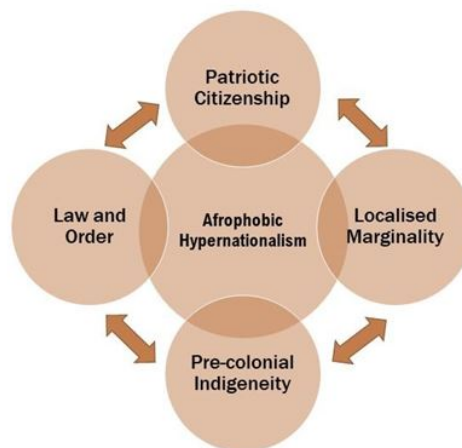
Patriotic citizenship: Here, I demonstrated how people accentuate nationalistic duty and pride to resist or embrace accusations of Afrophobia. Using affective appeals, a binary is constructed between sympathetic patriots and unsympathetic non-citizens. 'Non-citizens' may legally be South African, but this discursive strategy is a paradoxical mix of racist exclusion of minorities – like myself – and nationalist inclusion of black citizens, despite the ironic anti-black ontology informing the meta-discourse.

Law and order: Here, I demonstrated how people construct patriotism as protecting legal citizens from illegal immigrants by framing Afrophobia as necessary to eradicate lawlessness and foreign criminality. This aggressive patriarchy intersects with masculinist- and military discourse. A vicious cycle of fear and anger is created: fear of losing control (lawlessness and unemployment) and anger at government's inability to secure its borders and create jobs.

Localised marginality: Here, I demonstrated how people construct positions of unique disadvantage as experientially out of reach for people perceived to be privileged and unaffected by migrants. Geographic and class boundaries become the dividing line for who has the moral and epistemic authority to have an opinion about migrants and who does not, thereby placing constraints on the possibilities of who can access knowledge about the material effects of migrants.

Pre-colonial indigeneity: Here, I demonstrated how people construct a romanticised desire for pre-colonial life inhabited by indigenous peoples. This is linked to impatience around land redistribution following colonial land dispossession. This includes a paradoxical strategy to defend hypernationalism through racism, by turning against minority citizens who may have access to land, because land ownership is racialized and embedded in spatial asymmetries and inequities.

Each of these discourses intersects with the other as mutually constitutive. Taken together, they form a discursive model that goes beyond straightforward

xenophobia, racism, or ethno-nationalism. It is inherently anti-black and closer in its articulation to colonial-era and apartheid-era discourse. Social media speeds up the dissemination and transmission of this meta-discourse – via hashtags and hyperlinks – faster than ever. As such, I propose we think about this as not only xenophobic but *Afrophobic*, and not only nationalistic but *hypernationalist*.

Concluding remarks

Hassim et al. (2008) wonder whether our rainbow nation metaphor should be replaced by an onion: the outer layer reflecting the most vulnerable strata of society, such as foreign nationals; beneath them other politically peripheral groups; and eventually the innermost, protected core, those deemed 'worthy' of psychosocial dominance. In this ethno-nationalist reimagining of what inclusion and belonging looks like in South Africa – as compared to what we hope and mythologize it to be – we are left with an 'Onion Nation' that is hardly as romantic or appealing to the project of nation-building, inclusive citizenship, or democratic cosmopolitanism. It is, however, an apt conceptualization of our country. Building on this metaphor, I would add – tragically – that our violent peeling and slicing of this onion leaves many of us in tears. In a context of economic desperation, persistent poverty, and pent-up rage, in the most unequal country in the world, it is perhaps unsurprising that migrants are scapegoated for broken political promises. By hailing an imagined online community with shared anti-migrant sentiments, the proponents of #PutSouthAfricansFirst believe they are advocating a just war to gain a life of dignity and economic emancipation. A truly decolonized nation-state, however, requires us to think far more radically about what it means to live in harmony beyond the binaries of settlers and natives (Mamdani, 2020). As this article has demonstrated, the #PutSouthAfricansFirst movement is embedded in a discursive model of 'Afrophobic Hypernationalism' that rearticulates anti-black coloniality and impedes South Africa's democratic journey towards liberation, freedom, and decoloniality.

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