

# Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power

## Reimagining racism: understanding the whiteness and nationhood strategies of British-born South Africans --Manuscript Draft--

<b>Full Title:</b>	Reimagining racism: understanding the whiteness and nationhood strategies of British-born South Africans
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<b>Article Type:</b>	Special Issue
<b>Keywords:</b>	Whiteness, South Africa, apartheid, post-apartheid, denial, discourse
<b>Abstract:</b>	<p>This paper explores strategies deployed by a sample of white, British-born South Africans to account for their positions during apartheid and post-apartheid. Whereas literature on white racism identifies denial as a key strategy towards racial discrimination and the maintenance of privilege, the historical and political context of South Africa makes this tactic implausible. The paper contributes to understandings of pluralism within white identifications through investigation of diverse discursive strategies used to frame the overtly racist, apartheid regime and the present post-apartheid, supposedly, 'post-race' state. A range of positions are identified, in different ways attempting to minimise individual implication. A common feature however is to reimagine the structure of social relations, in order to diminish responsibility for the sins of the past or the success of the future. While the picture is fractured by the plurality of white responses, the paper demonstrates profound difficulties in adjusting to the new social reality.</p>
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<b>Response to Reviewers:</b>	<p>I would like to thank the reviewers for their thoughtful and valuable comments, all of which I have endeavored to address in my revisions. I do feel these have undoubtedly improved the article. Within the word limit of 7000 words, I have responded to the advice as follows:</p> <p>1.Reviwer #1 : I found myself wondering if the author might consider further developing their analysis. This would need to be paired with a more sustained consideration of where the work sits in relation to scholarly research on whiteness as well as in relation to its current orientation, which seems to position the paper in conversation with research on questions of race and whiteness in South Africa. Specifically, I felt that the plurality of whiteness that the author identifies in the abstract could be more fully developed so that it speaks to other works on this plurality-what does this and the South African case more generally offer in terms of understandings of the social production of whiteness? Scholar of whiteness have turned in recent years towards an understanding of the situational and contextual production of whiteness, and it would seem that the current paper sits within this field of scholarship; what might this paper offer to our understandings of whiteness more generally?</p> <p>I agree that the original version of the paper appeared to orient itself primarily to debates and research within S Africa, which can, arguably, be rather inward-looking. As such, I have now given its broader contribution much more thought and have worked through the paper again to highlight how it may speak to research on whiteness beyond South Africa as well as within it. In particular, the text has been revised on page 2 and a new paragraph written on page 5 to outline more clearly the paper's contribution to current debates within CWS. This builds on discussions of plurality to discuss how S Africa is in a different political moment to the Global North where there is a rise in the power of (white) populism. The post-apartheid context and the very public disgrace of the activities of whiteness during apartheid, means that this is not overt as a political movement within S Africa. The ways in which white people are positioning themselves within a very different social and political context of 'white shame' and displacement adds to understandings of whiteness and its global pluralities.</p> <p>2.More discussion (perhaps in the conclusion) could also be devoted to working through what the self-positioning of these Britons as outside of the South African structure-in various ways-does in terms of reinforcing their position precisely within the social structure. I feel that this would give the paper more of a critical edge, and would allow the author to demonstrate how such narratives demonstrate [unacknowledged]</p>

complicity in the production of racism in South Africa.  
This point is very well made and I am grateful for it. I have rewritten the conclusion to develop this point and achieve greater criticality.

3.It would also be valuable if the author were to break up the text with some subtitles, perhaps organized around the four categories that they use to describe how these Britons talk about race in South Africa.  
I have re-organized the discussion section into the 4 sub-headings as suggested.

4.It would also be useful to have a sense of the methods used in the research, the broader project of which the current paper is part.  
I have expanded the discussion of methods as suggested, within the limits of wordspace.

5.I would also say that the title of the paper-while evocative-is not really suited for current discoverability needs in respect to journal articles. I would recommend that the author considers a title that includes the key concepts they address, and perhaps use the current title as a subtitle.  
I have actually rephrased the title this now to appear as:  
Reimagining racism: understanding the whiteness and nationhood strategies of British-born South Africans

6.Finally, some further context would be valuable-indicating the scale of the British-born population in South Africa as well as some of the conditions under which these migrations were encouraged.  
An expanded discussion of the political history of British migration has been incorporated into the paragraph at the top of page 3.  
Once again, many thanks for the thoughtful comments which I hope I have addressed satisfactorily.

## **Reimagining racism: understanding the whiteness and nationhood strategies of British-born South Africans**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores strategies deployed by a sample of white, British-born South Africans to account for their positions during apartheid and post-apartheid. Whereas literature on white racism identifies *denial* as a key strategy towards racial discrimination and the maintenance of privilege, the historical and political context of South Africa makes this tactic implausible. The paper contributes to understandings of pluralism within white identifications through investigation of diverse discursive strategies used to frame the overtly racist, apartheid regime and the present post-apartheid, supposedly, 'post-race' state. A range of positions are identified, in different ways attempting to minimise individual implication. A common feature however is to *reimagine* the structure of social relations, in order to diminish responsibility for the sins of the past or the success of the future. While the picture is fractured by the plurality of white responses, the paper demonstrates profound difficulties in adjusting to the new social reality.

Keywords: South Africa, whiteness, apartheid, post-apartheid, denial, discourse

### **Introduction**

I didn't agree with some things that were going on, but I was visiting – whilst I came as a permanent resident with assisted passage, I was visiting. The first concept of apartheid in 1981 for me as a single white fellow is the bus goes past, that one's got black people on, this one's got white people on. And there's more black buses going past than there are white buses. Which annoyed me, because I would get on the black bus, they wouldn't worry me. (Stephen, 50, white)

As Stephen drove me through Johannesburg's affluent suburbs on our way to the old colonial Rand Club, I contemplated his positioning as a 'visitor' to South Africa. Stephen has lived in the city for 30 years, highly prosperous with children attending elite private schools. He appears thoroughly embedded in South African life and takes an active interest in the nation's contemporary politics, albeit his descriptions of his lifestyle and his views on social relations in the post-apartheid regime appeared to be no different from earlier accounts of white lives under apartheid. I asked him what had changed since 1994, has South Africa successfully transitioned into Mandela's vision of a post-race 'rainbow nation'? 'We'll never quite get there, and never is a long time. You'll continue along this path, but you'll still have difficulty accepting some of the odd behaviour patterns or other parts of the community' he replies.

Does this bother him? ‘What have I got to lose?’ he replies. ‘You want to go back to the UK, you just book a flight. So, it doesn't seem like it's a big gamble to stay’.

The extent to which South Africa is transitioning into Mandela’s vision of a racially equal society not only dominates South African politics but is of significant international interest, not least against the backdrop of rising white nationalist projects in the West (Garner 2017). Since the legal collapse of the racial segregation policies known as apartheid in 1994, and the privileges of white supremacy now officially rejected, South African people have been active in attempting to reform raced relations, facilitate greater economic and social equity and imagine new ‘post-race’ performances of nationhood and citizenship (Steyn and Ballard 2013). However, the considerable and impressive scholarship examining these processes of readjustment, (e.g. Steyn 2001, 2012, Distiller and Steyn 2004, Ballard 2004a, Salusbury and Foster 2004, Steyn and Foster 2008) has revealed the extent to which whiteness has nevertheless sought to sustain its structurally privileged positionality (e.g. Ballard 2004b, Lemanski 2006, Dlanga 2016; Chigumadzi 2015). Although formal policies no longer support racial segregation, racialized zones persist across the nation; economically, socially and spatially. While the complicity of white people in the perpetuation of this system is highly diverse, just how some continue to operate ‘in the territory of being white’ (Duster 2001:15) within the changed regime remains an important question, not only when ‘taking stock’ of contemporary democratic South Africa (Steyn and Ballard 2013) but to furthering understandings of the complex and diverse ways in which white power and privilege live on, even when ‘monolithic white supremacy is over’ (Winant 1997:76). Across the globe, whiteness not only continues to deliver entitlements but, in multiple contexts and political moments, is demonstrating a ‘backlash’ against the assumed gains of non-white Others (Hughey 2014, Garner 2017). To better understand and challenge the mechanisms by which white dominance is endlessly reinscribed, its ‘complex, multifaceted, contingent and fluid nature’ (Watson et al 2015: xiv) continues to demand investigation in multiple and diverse contexts.

This paper aims to contribute to this interrogation by drawing on research of a sample of white, British-born, residents who first migrated to South Africa during the apartheid regime (1970s to 1980s) and who have since remained in the post-apartheid state. This group offers an interesting, if partial, lens to the questions raised above, with British migration to South Africa resulting from a long and highly specific political history. A tenet of both pro-imperial and Afrikaner Nationalist leaders, various schemes were designed from 1820 onwards to

encourage British settlement (see Conway and Leonard 2014 for more detail). During the apartheid era, assisted passages were offered to white Britons as part of the government's attempts to shore up the racialized economy, such that Britons formed the largest national community of all white immigrants (averaging around 38% between 1946-87) (Peberdy 2009). At the height of white immigration (1961-77), 243,000 British citizens settled in South Africa. While the atrocities of late apartheid and perceived uncertainties about post-apartheid triggered an exodus of British and other white settlers, South Africa's attraction as a retirement destination has meant that numbers of British-born residents have stabilised at around 200,000 (Conway and Leonard 2014).

Migration during apartheid demanded that British migrants position themselves within a highly-segregated context, overtly different from 'home'. Decisions had to be made anew on meanings of nationhood and white identities. In contrast to recent defences put forward by some South African-born whites (Steyn 2012), *ignorance* of apartheid was not a discourse available to this group. Nor, as suggested by other research on modern racism (van Dijk 1992; Nelson 2013), was *denial* of racial discrimination. For whilst the representation of South Africa by the British media has been accused of 'structural hypocrisy' (Sanders 1999: 5), coverage of the black struggle had become increasingly mainstream from the 1970s onwards, escalating public campaigns to boycott sporting events and imported goods from South Africa (Fieldhouse 2005). It would have been difficult not to have been aware of the growing support for the anti-apartheid movement developing in Britain and internationally (Thörn, 2006). At the same time, the coherence of whiteness was becoming contested in Britain, as black and Asian in-migration rose. Against a background of growing national debates on democracy, the meanings of race, racism and possibilities of multiculturalism, a decision was taken by this group to migrate to a hardened racist regime, where whiteness was explicitly mobilised as a resource in the securing of privilege. Migration was undoubtedly, therefore, bound up with choices about identities and performances of whiteness.

The decisions to be made were far from 'one off' but continued to need remaking. The apartheid state changed considerably between the 1960s and the 1980s: while in the '60s and first half of the '70s British migrants arrived at a country which was prosperous and, on the surface, economically and politically stable, from the late 1970s onwards the deepening entrenchment of racial segregation policies delivered political and economic turmoil (Conway and Leonard 2014). The increasingly challenging economic context and strengthening of black political action tested orthodoxies of whiteness, raising interrogations

of its meanings and automatic relations with power and privilege (Steyn 2001). Indeed, the eventual ending of the apartheid regime occasioned ‘a radical shift in identity construction among whites, whose comfortable social supremacy [became] discredited as racism’ (Pillay and Durrheim 2013: 55). With whiteness publicly shamed and stigmatised (ibid), how white people position themselves within the new discursive terrain has been the subject of much critical investigation (Steyn 2004; Jansen 2009; McEwen 2013).

Research on racism more generally reveals that *denial* is a common white discourse, occurring at both the individual level as well as within institutional and political spheres (Nelson 2013). Studies across international contexts such as Australia, the Netherlands, Scotland and New Zealand identify that, within contemporary talk about race, denial of racism is a pervasive tactic to avoid charges of operating in racist terms (van Dijk 1992; Augoustinos and Every 2007). This paper builds on these investigations, arguing that the South African context provides additional nuance in the identification of the discourses and tropes through which the territories of whiteness operate. While the persistence of overt racism within the nation challenges the ability of white people to position themselves within discourses of outright denial, the ways in which racialized systems, past and present are *reimagined* function to curate and sustain white subjectivities in relation to privilege.

### **Conceptualising whiteness in South Africa**

While ever cautious of constructing an epistemology based on a form of ‘exceptionalism’ (Nuttall 2001: 116), the specificity of the South African historical and political context reveals how whiteness functions as a material and structural form of ‘governmentality’, ‘a set of apparatuses and technologies, the aim of which is the regulation of the everyday perceptions, imaginations, and behaviours of people on a large scale’ (Nuttall 2001: 118; Posel 2001). In apartheid South Africa for example, through a concatenation of discursive, institutional and legislative methods, the white state ensured that racial segregation was visibly and overtly embodied, performed and maintained through the material and cultural practices of everyday life (Posel 2001). As well as operating to govern others, whiteness also provides the apparatus for white people to manage themselves. However, whilst most research on white social positionality explores the strategies by which people secure advantage and maintain dominance (e.g. Ballard 2004b, Steyn and Foster 2008), it is also recognised that subjectivities of whiteness are multiple and complex, and that a range of

alternative subject positions and performances co-exist (Nuttall and Michael 2000, Nuttall 2001, Twine and Gallagher 2008; Peens and Dubbeld 2013).

Some inspiring scholarship has identified how ‘whiteness in South Africa differs from Western contexts in that it is more obvious in its potency: self-conscious rather than deliberately obscured and accepted rather than veiled as a site of privilege’ (Salisbury and Foster 2004: 93). At the same time, it is recognised that ‘whiteness in South Africa’ is by no means a unified category, but is fractured historically, geographically, politically, religiously and economically as well as by language and (sometimes precarious) identifications with other nations (Steyn 2001). While some position themselves simply as ‘South African’, many also self-identify as Afrikaners, Russian Jews, Italians, Portuguese or British (Conway and Leonard 2014; van der Westhuizen 2017). Since the collapse of apartheid, and with it the singular, dominant ‘master narrative’ of whiteness, Steyn (2001) suggests that the diversities between performances of whiteness have become more multiple and nuanced. Politically and culturally, there now exist many shades of whiteness in South Africa.

That white identities are plural, dynamic, situationally and contextually produced, and subject to renegotiation, is well recognised in the Critical White Studies (CWS) literature (Frankenberg 1993, Bhopal 2018). The key point of interest here, making connections with this body of work but also contributing to its breadth of focus, is that post-apartheid South Africa is in a different historical and political moment to the contemporary dynamic of the North, where recent electoral and political events have demonstrated a noisy rise in the potency and open ‘acceptability’ of right wing and populist mobilization. Song (2014) argues that racialized discourse in the UK and the US is framed by ‘a culture of racial equivalence’, through which the playing field between whites and Others is deemed to have levelled or even tipped in favour of non-whites, and readjustment is thus sought (see also Garner 2017). While, as I go on to discuss, elements of this discourse certainly infuse the talk of white South Africans, this is against the dominant public discourse that apartheid, and the racial segregation and racism it spawned, has been universally condemned as a ‘monstrous’ regime. Here, whiteness has been very publicly disgraced and displaced, and the official political system is one of black rule (Pillay and Durrheim 2013).

A key focus of CWS in the North is to grapple with the ways in which normative (invisible) whiteness works to perpetuate embedded racism within its institutions (Rhodes 2013). For example, as stated above, Nelson (2013) argues that *denial* is a significant feature of modern

racism. Building on van Dijk's (1992) typology, she identifies four discourses by which denial of racism operates: temporal deflection: minorities today experience less racism than in the past; spatial deflection: racism is worse in other countries or regions; deflection from the mainstream: racism is only a problem with a small group of people; absence: outright dismissal of racism. While Nelson offers a valuable conceptualisation for the strategies of whiteness within these settings, the self-conscious and unveiled nature of South African whiteness (Salisbury and Foster 2004) highlights the need for further granulation within frameworks of analysis, to understand 'the nuanced and locally specific ways in which whiteness as a form of power is deployed, performed, policed and reinvented (Twine and Gallagher 2008:5) across both North and South. Within this mission, in the remaining sections of the paper, I explore the discourses mobilised by a sample of white British-born South Africans in their narratives of the changing political and social regime. I revisit 30 interviews which I conducted between 2009 and 2012<sup>1</sup> as part of a larger project exploring the meanings of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa (Conway and Leonard 2014). Participants of both long and short-term residence were accessed through a combination of online advertising and snowballing under the banner of 'being British in South Africa'. The vast and speedy response we received revealed the traction that a British identity still holds for some, further supported through often very lengthy qualitative ethnographic and biographical interviews wherein participants talked openly about their attitudes and experiences. I am not, of course, claiming that these interviews are in any way representative of generalised attitudes of white British-born people in South Africa. Rather, the aim is to generate an intensive examination of a range of 'cultural voices' (Prasad 2005: 90) to develop theoretical understanding of their positions. The approach taken is to understand race, as with nationality and gender, as co-constructive, such that raced identities and positions are constructed and negotiated through social structures, interactions and practices, both discursive and material. The focus in this paper is the role of discourses, or 'practices that systematically form the object of which they speak' (Foucault 1972: 49), and how, within this sample, these are deployed to make sense of the world by shaping meaning and, therefore, power relations.

### **Reimagining Racial Segregation**

Through my thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, I identified four discourses by which respondents described their relationship to racial segregation and social transformation. What was striking were the ways in which racialized systems, past and



present, were not denied, but reimagined and thus recast through the ways in which participants positioned historical and political events and their own role within these. Their discourses were in the main constructed at an individual level, although on occasion blurred into encompassing a broader social group of white people. Consequently, building on Nelson's (2013) typology of societal-level discourses, I categorise the four discourses as:

- *temporal reimagination*: racism in the past was not as bad as was made out and a return to the 'good old days' is desired by both blacks and whites
- *boundary reimagination*: the racism of other groups (e.g. Afrikaners) is worse and racialized systems are a consequence of their beliefs, not ours
- *acceptance*: racial segregation exists but is accepted as it delivers privileges to whites
- *social reimagination*: racial segregation exists but social change is possible

The discourses operated in an 'intertextualised' way: that is, people did not neatly position themselves within a single discourse but cross-currents of others were apparent (Baxter 2006). However, it was often the case that one discourse emerged as more significant in a respondent's story and so, in the following discussion, I draw on these as exemplifications.

### *Temporal reimagination*

Steyn (2013) notes that some white South Africans claim ignorance of what was happening during apartheid, thus generating a 'feel-good' history for whites. While, as I explain above, it would have beggared belief for British migrants during the apartheid regime to claim ignorance of its existence, some I spoke to, through the strategy of *temporal reimagination*, attempted to recraft the past as 'not as bad as it was made out to be' in the British/world press. Moira, for example, migrating to South Africa in the late 1960s to establish a safari park, argued that what she found was actually no different from any other Western context:

In some ways [the South African Government] were too good at communicating, because I don't think that racialism was any worse here, but the mistake was giving it a name: 'apartheid'. Rather than trying to shovel it under the carpet and say, 'oh no, it doesn't exist', they were honest about it, upfront about it and said, 'yes it exists, we know it exists, we're going to support it and we're going to give it a name!'

It must be recognised that for those who arrived during the 1960s and early 70s, the apartheid system was at that time relatively 'low' compared to the heights of violence reached in the late '70s and '80s (Conway and Leonard 2014). Perhaps because of this, as well as the fact

that whiteness in Britain was normalised and unacknowledged as a racial category, a key response among long term residents, when asked about apartheid, was to attempt to de-problematise it by minimising its effects. Moira, for example, was keen to inform me that blacks and whites mixed freely and, further, that their access to space was no different to that of the whites:

I used to go down into Pretoria, do my shopping and just window shop! And what fascinated me, I think more than anything else, was the fact that it was multi-racial, there were blacks and whites walking around without any obvious animosity and in fact, looking at some of the little black teenage girls walking around, they were better dressed than I was!

Moira's description of downtown Pretoria imagines an unracialised spatial freedom, despite the stringent pass laws which operated to regulate black access to urban space. Yet whilst the legal context is later acknowledged in Moira's narrative, its discriminatory nature is recreated:

I was talking to this Afrikaner guy one day about blacks having passes, because this is something that always comes up, why do the blacks have to have passes? He put his hand in his pocket and he said, 'there's my pass, it's just that we call it an identity document'. Everyone had to have one, it wasn't just the blacks, and we still have to have them today. So, it wasn't just the blacks and the coloureds that had to have passes!

Steyn (2004) notes how 'white talk' 'undertakes ideological work to minimise damage to 'white privilege and maximise group advantage' (2004: 70) and it was clear from my interviews that, in relation to post-apartheid, the British-born South Africans I talked to were also adopting a set of tactical positions. Temporal reimagination featured as a trope, often mutating in the contemporary moment into a form of apartheid nostalgia: things were good under the system and most people, black and white, accept that its demise has therefore been 'a mistake'. Dick and Susan, for example, also in their seventies, are very comfortably settled in Kwazulu-Natal, surrounded by a community of other British-born residents and well looked after by their black 'helpers', Elijah and Christmas. Whilst local life generally passes peacefully, it is punctuated by the occasional violent incident, such as burglary and, occasionally, fatal attack. Susan thinks crime has got worse post-apartheid, and wonders, 'do we need a double-barrelled shotgun, just in case?':

Elijah and Christmas say they were a lot better off under the Brittos, the white guys, because then – well there was law and order then you see. They had their *dompas*<sup>ii</sup>, but they knew where they stood. It was interesting to hear them say that. Then they wouldn't get robbed on the way home for their wages as they might do now. There was more

security because there was more control. I mean the police, you can't trust them now. And they [the blacks] suffer more than we do in many ways.

The major trope underpinning Susan's diatribe is the continued need for a strong, united white response to the violent onslaught which the ending of apartheid has unleashed against the white communities, myopically here conflated into 'the Brittos'. The material and legislative remnants of the old regime, reimagined as a benign and secure system for both whites and blacks, continues to haunt and reanimate ideas about the community and nation that now exists. However, whilst this predominantly 'us' versus 'them' position has a clear resonance with the discourses of apartheid, by also claiming the existence of a *black* nostalgia for apartheid, a pseudo racial solidarity is claimed to avoid any charge of racism (van Dijk 1992).

### *Boundary reimagination*

The second discourse constructed by participants was one of *boundary reimagination*: apartheid and its offspring, ongoing racialized zones in contemporary South Africa, are both 'nothing to do with me'. This strategy, demonstrated by Stephen's quote at the start of the paper, positions apartheid as the policy of an Afrikaans-led government, thereby displacing British-born whites into an alternative ('just visiting') community with little responsibility for its creation or demise. Boundary reimagination offers a position of marginality which can be simultaneously empowering: the problem of racism lies with others, allowing the British to position themselves within a 'myth of tolerance' (Essed 1991) and claim the moral high ground. Associated with this, most of the people I talked to had never become South African citizens and, as such, do not have the vote. A position of *not political*, disengaged from any sort of political participation or identification, was an almost ubiquitous and unsolicited ululation amongst respondents, of both long and short-term residence, often offered to justify their earlier tolerance of, or complicity with, apartheid and the privileges it delivered:

'I wasn't really interested in politics.... blow the politics! All my life, perhaps a terrible thing to admit, I haven't really been interested in people, what people do, how they act, what they do, let them get on with it, I'm just interested in having animals around. So, blow apartheid, I wanted an animal!' (Moira)

Similarly, the ongoing sustainability of racial segregation is attributed to the failing policies of the contemporary government rather than the actions of individuals. The supposed 'incompetence' of the African National Congress (ANC) to manage and run the country in accordance with the expectations of the 'first world' is a prevalent narrative which not only

characterised the interviews but is also captured in the ‘white talk’ of the national press more broadly (Steyn and Foster 2008). Blaming the institutions of governance, while simultaneously disassociating themselves from these, is an important discursive tool to mitigate against accusations of personal acts of racism (Nelson 2013). British nationality was important here, frequently mobilised as part of the toolkit of boundary reimagination, whereby features of the current system were demonised as the behaviours of others. Neil, an engineer in his 40s illustrates:

There’s a lot of corruption because there isn’t the money or resources to give to people. One time I was driving back from work, and I was pulled over by a metro cop and he asked me questions like, “where you come from?” and then he says “it’s Friday isn’t it? I’m thinking I’m gonna have some beers tonight!” He was like, “do you have any money?” and it was like begging, begging...police begging. It makes me annoyed and when I go to the UK and I see the police pull someone over, I feel like *that* is how it should be done, you know, not like what you see in this country.’

A challenge for white people in South Africa is managing the ‘‘baggage’ of the accumulated traces and relics of past selves while remaining virtuous through one’s own continual reanimation’ (Kelly and Riach 2014:15). For many of my British respondents, this involved crafting the self carefully to dissociate from any sense of citizenship, and hence implication, in South African systems and processes, then and now.

### *Acceptance*

In contradistinction, however, I found a distinctive feature of the talk of some was to openly acknowledge an *acceptance* of racial segregation. There was a classed and gendered aspect to this: South Africa’s immigration policies under apartheid welcomed the skills of the (male) white working classes and British migrants suffering the economic volatilities of the 1970s and 80s had much to gain in terms of occupational, career and, hence, class mobility (Peberdy 2009). Many were unapologetic of their acceptance of the system by which this was achieved. I chat to Richard, a retired manufacturer in his seventies, at a very exclusive and predominantly white Country Club in Johannesburg:

I come from the East End of London, so there's a huge difference between where I was brought up to let's say, Port Elizabeth. So you're by the sea for a start. And the life, let's be honest about it, I'm not one of those people who will shrink form that part of South Africa's history, it was brilliant! If you come to a country where you've got blue skies and you've got sea and you've got beaches and you've got a wonderful way of life with a maid and everything is quite a zillion times cheaper than the UK; you think this is paradise! And it really was. So politics aside, there's nobody that was in that period from the '70s right up

until '90s who can say that they didn't like the country, because it was very good to them at that time, let's make no bones about it.

In contrast to the fears that had escalated within white communities in the period leading up to 1994, daily lives and material circumstances have, for many whites, remained untouched.

Kevin, a prosperous builder in his fifties explains:

Sitting round the supper table, which we do a lot in South Africa, all the negativity! You know, "When the blacks come in this is going to happen, that's going to happen". And nothing really changed. All that's changed is the word 'Apartheid' is not there. The whites still go to their pub, the blacks still go to their pubs. You've got the up-market restaurants where now, there's a mixture. But if I go around the corner to my local watering hole, I would say about 90%, 95% are whites. They tend to stick to where their friends are and what they want. So, in that way there's nothing changed much.

Kevin himself has strong working-class roots, having migrated in the 1980s from the depressed north-east of England looking for work. He draws on this background to justify why he quickly accepted the prevailing regime and the opportunities it offered for people like him. Now, 30 years later, he is the 'baas' of his own firm. Surveying his large house in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg, he rationalises: 'I could never have this lifestyle at home!' Stephen also enjoyed 'a bit of class-hopping' by coming to South Africa and realises how much he has benefited:

So occasionally I ask why I am still here. I know the answer, it's because my kids go to fantastic schools and I'm now fifty-something and have ten cars in the garage. There are things that you can do in a place like this that you cannot do in a place like London'.

Some respondents explained that although they *were* shocked when they first arrived in South Africa, they soon came to recognise how the system offered them substantial benefits. Jean (60s) confesses with some honesty:

What has struck my husband and I in later years is that it was very easy to accept the option that made life comfortable for us. So, one very easily forgot one's objections and accepted, accepted the status quo, because we were comfortable. Because of the townships and the locations, one didn't come into contact with a lot of black people, maybe the tea girl or the company driver, but you didn't meet very many black people, certainly not professional, middle-class people, they were all in exile, so one wasn't aware of what they were suffering, or what their problems were. And they didn't say much, I suppose they were frightened to, so we got on with our lives, and accepted what was really quite nice for us.

Jean now deplores her previous position and has tried to make amends by working actively within her local mixed community. She explains that she is attempting to eschew the dualistic

perspectives of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and adopt a more radicalised position towards South Africa’s embedded racialisation.

### *Social reimagination*

A minority of respondents took a position of *social reimagination* from the start, however. Their stories underline the diversity of positions and white subjectivities and how the experiences and ideas of white/British people in South Africa should not be conflated or foreclosed into a uniform ‘condition’ (Nuttall 2001). As Nuttall (2001) argues, the amplifications of forms of whiteness which may be at odds with the official orthodoxies must also be attended to. A salient illustration is provided by Andrew, an engineer who migrated to the Free State from London in the early 1980s, specifically to challenge apartheid. He remembers how it was ‘such a different place to the UK’:

We were in a gold mining area, and there was absolutely no mixing between whites and blacks: it was very, very segregated, even the small shops, they’d have like the normal sort of white area and then a little sort of window with a ledge where the black people could go and buy their loaves of bread and things like that. That was a shock: a real eye-opener.

Andrew’s job often took him into a black township near Johannesburg, which was unusual during apartheid:

I used to go down to the black surveyor and the engineer, I could go round their houses because I had the permit to go into the township. Otherwise you didn’t go into the township and you would get into trouble if you did... it suited me actually, because it allowed me to see what I was really wanted to see. So, I was very lucky in that respect.

Andrew spent his evenings drinking in Soweto and soon made friends, despite the obstacles mixed relationships faced:

If we wanted to socialise we’d go into Lesotho because there, there was no segregation. So, we, just like you would with any group of friends, you get in a minibus or a couple of cars or whatever and off you go. And I used to travel with them in the same vehicle, which might sound like it’s nothing, but there were laws. We were often stopped by police on the way.

When Andrew met the woman who eventually became his wife, he continued to refuse to abide by the prevailing laws of the time and moved to live in Soweto:

As a white man, a black woman was not allowed to ride in the front seat of a car, she had to go in the back seat. So driving around with my wife-to-be, we’d get stopped, and it would be, “What’s she doing in there?” The police were pretty nasty. Gave you a hard time, I’d guess you’d say. I was rumoured to be one of perhaps two or three white people who were in one way or another living in Soweto. But I didn’t think anything of it in those days. Didn’t have any fear of getting into trouble or being caught doing something that I

could be told off for. Didn't really cross my mind because it was like, well, that's what I wanted to find out about and I did.

For others, it has taken the post-apartheid context to force a rethinking of hegemonic assumptions and reimagine the society. As Jean explains: 'we all have weaknesses, we all make mistakes in life and we all have struggles, and we've had to change a lot. Coping with South African society is a huge challenge...but we are trying to give back to the country something of the great benefits we've had'. Some of the newer migrants had come to South Africa specifically to be part of the changing regime and to witness history being made. Amongst these there was an almost palpable sense of what could be achieved. Laura and her husband Matt, a missionary, had asked to be sent to Johannesburg, rather than Cape Town, so that they could live and work in the place 'where South Africa is really changing, where you're actually going to make a difference, really engage in South Africa!' Rejecting the northern suburbs where most white residents cluster, the couple live in Sophiatown, a black suburb which became legendary during the struggle. They are clearly enjoying being part of building a new society:

'there's a sense that everybody's invited to join in the history— you're very close to history being made here because it's in the making. You can taste it in your — that edge of meeting people. Everybody's making an effort and moving forwards — it's an opportunity — everyone says the opportunity is here to be grabbed and you're quite close to the people who are trying to grab the opportunities.'

## **Conclusion**

Although apartheid ceased well over twenty years ago, this research shows how the regime's legacy continues to inflect the narratives of its sample of British-born South Africans, both in the re/making of memories about the past as well as in constructions of the present. The relationship with apartheid is complex: whilst it is clear that it was, and still is, a defining feature of their lives, for most there is scant acknowledgment of any agency in its production. In contrast, a range of discursive techniques are deployed by which a position 'on the edge' is imagined. The aim is to remove themselves from the responsibility that accompanies power and privilege, and the centre of production of the trenchant racism from which they benefitted.

The discursive strategies are inventive. Key is the reimagining of the material realities and social relations of apartheid, claiming the system was subject to misrepresentation and exaggeration. Combined with the emphasis on British marginality in apartheid governance, the intention is to sidestep blame, and render unnecessary any need for engagement in, or

support for, the struggle. In reconceptualising the streets of 1960s Pretoria, or the African bush, as spaces of pleasure, to be enjoyed equally by whites and blacks alike, the decision to migrate and settle in a highly racist and discriminatory regime is sanitised, even made rational. A similar, but more individualistic, tactic is to reimagine boundaries and position oneself as a 'visitor', a stranger in a foreign land, thereby locating apartheid as beyond the remit of personal responsibility.

Others openly admit the system was unfair and that they enjoyed its substantial material and social benefits. Whilst this goes some way to acknowledging complicity, by reifying apartheid rather than constituting it as a process which required ongoing participation and maintenance, a lack of responsibility for it is also negotiated. Those that claim that they tried to challenge apartheid, as well as support contemporary strategies for a racially equal society, still reveal a sense of entitlement to travel and live as they please.

The self-positioning of the British as *outside* of South African social structures and politics continues to dominate the narratives about the present. This disengagement, and the lack of acknowledgement of the need to hold themselves and each other to account, and critically challenge how their own practices may contribute to the ongoing production of privilege racism in South Africa is in itself a highly political and racialised act. It reinforces a position within the social structure of complicity with white privilege, tragically denuding British-born South Africans of the opportunity to reimagine the meanings of whiteness and nationhood in the post-apartheid context .

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<sup>i</sup> The larger research project, funded by the British Academy, was conducted with Daniel Conway. I focussed on British born South Africans Johannesburg and Kwazulu-Natal and Daniel focussed on Cape Town.

<sup>ii</sup> Dompas, literally meaning 'dumb pass' were the pass books that black people were required to carry under apartheid

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## **Reimagining racism: understanding the whiteness and nationhood strategies of British-born South Africans**

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# Reimagining racism: understanding the whiteness and nationhood strategies of British-born South Africans

## Abstract

This paper explores strategies deployed by a sample of white, British-born South Africans to account for their positions during apartheid and post-apartheid. Whereas literature on white racism identifies *denial* as a key strategy towards racial discrimination and the maintenance of privilege, the historical and political context of South Africa makes this tactic implausible. The paper contributes to understandings of pluralism within white identifications through investigation of diverse discursive strategies used to frame the overtly racist, apartheid regime and the present post-apartheid, supposedly, ‘post-race’ state. A range of positions are identified, in different ways attempting to minimise individual implication. A common feature however is to *reimagine* the structure of social relations, in order to diminish responsibility for the sins of the past or the success of the future. While the picture is fractured by the plurality of white responses, the paper demonstrates profound difficulties in adjusting to the new social reality.

Keywords: South Africa, whiteness, apartheid, post-apartheid, denial, discourse

## Introduction

I didn't agree with some things that were going on, but I was visiting – whilst I came as a permanent resident with assisted passage, I was visiting. The first concept of apartheid in 1981 for me as a single white fellow is the bus goes past, that one's got black people on, this one's got white people on. And there's more black buses going past than there are white buses. Which annoyed me, because I would get on the black bus, they wouldn't worry me. (Stephen, 50, white)

As Stephen drove me through Johannesburg's affluent suburbs on our way to the old colonial Rand Club, I contemplated his positioning as a ‘visitor’ to South Africa. Stephen has lived in the city for 30 years, highly prosperous with children attending elite private schools. He appears thoroughly embedded in South African life and takes an active interest in the nation's contemporary politics, albeit his descriptions of his lifestyle and his views on social relations in the post-apartheid regime appeared to be no different from earlier accounts of white lives under apartheid. I asked him what had changed since 1994, has South Africa successfully transitioned into Mandela's vision of a post-race ‘rainbow nation’? ‘We'll never quite get there, and never is a long time. You'll continue along this path, but you'll still have difficulty accepting some of the odd behaviour patterns or other parts of the community’ he replies.

1 Does this bother him? ‘What have I got to lose?’ he replies. ‘You want to go back to the UK,  
2 you just book a flight. So, it doesn't seem like it's a big gamble to stay’.  
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4 The extent to which South Africa is transitioning into Mandela’s vision of a racially equal  
5 society not only dominates South African politics but is of significant international interest,  
6 not least against the backdrop of rising white nationalist projects in the West (Garner 2017).  
7 Since the legal collapse of the racial segregation policies known as apartheid in 1994, and the  
8 privileges of white supremacy now officially rejected, South African people have been  
9 active in attempting to reform raced relations, facilitate greater economic and social equity  
10 and imagine new ‘post-race’ performances of nationhood and citizenship (Steyn and Ballard  
11 2013). However, the considerable and impressive scholarship examining these processes of  
12 readjustment, (e.g. Steyn 2001, 2012, Distiller and Steyn 2004, Ballard 2004a, Salusbury and  
13 Foster 2004, Steyn and Foster 2008) has revealed the extent to which whiteness has  
14 nevertheless sought to sustain its structurally privileged positionality (e.g. Ballard 2004b,  
15 Lemanski 2006, Dlanga 2016; Chigumadzi 2015). Although formal policies no longer  
16 support racial segregation, racialized zones persist across the nation; economically, socially  
17 and spatially. While the complicity of white people in the perpetuation of this system is  
18 highly diverse, just how some continue to operate ‘in the territory of being white’ (Duster  
19 2001:15) within the changed regime remains an important question, not only when ‘taking  
20 stock’ of contemporary democratic South Africa (Steyn and Ballard 2013) but to furthering  
21 understandings of the complex and diverse ways in which white power and privilege live on,  
22 even when ‘monolithic white supremacy is over’ (Winant 1997:76). Across the globe,  
23 whiteness not only continues to deliver entitlements but, in multiple contexts and political  
24 moments, is demonstrating a ‘backlash’ against the assumed gains of non-white Others  
25 (Hughey 2014, Garner 2017). To better understand and challenge the mechanisms by which  
26 white dominance is endlessly reinscribed, its ‘complex, multifaceted, contingent and fluid  
27 nature’ (Watson et al 2015: xiv) continues to demand investigation in multiple and diverse  
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50 This paper aims to contribute to this interrogation by drawing on research of a sample of  
51 white, British-born, residents who first migrated to South Africa during the apartheid regime  
52 (1970s to 1980s) and who have since remained in the post-apartheid state. This group offers  
53 an interesting, if partial, lens to the questions raised above, with British migration to South  
54 Africa resulting from a long and highly specific political history. A tenet of both pro-imperial  
55 and Afrikaner Nationalist leaders, various schemes were designed from 1820 onwards to  
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1 encourage British settlement (see Conway and Leonard 2014 for more detail). During the  
2 apartheid era, assisted passages were offered to white Britons as part of the government's  
3 attempts to shore up the racialized economy, such that Britons formed the largest national  
4 community of all white immigrants (averaging around 38% between 1946-87) (Peberdy  
5 2009). At the height of white immigration (1961-77), 243,000 British citizens settled in South  
6 Africa. While the atrocities of late apartheid and perceived uncertainties about post-apartheid  
7 triggered an exodus of British and other white settlers, South Africa's attraction as a  
8 retirement destination has meant that numbers of British-born residents have stabilised at  
9 around 200,000 (Conway and Leonard 2014).  
10

11 Migration during apartheid demanded that British migrants position themselves within a  
12 highly-segregated context, overtly different from 'home'. Decisions had to be made anew on  
13 meanings of nationhood and white identities. In contrast to recent defences put forward by  
14 some South African-born whites (Steyn 2012), *ignorance* of apartheid was not a discourse  
15 available to this group. Nor, as suggested by other research on modern racism (van Dijk  
16 1992; Nelson 2013), was *denial* of racial discrimination. For whilst the representation of  
17 South Africa by the British media has been accused of 'structural hypocrisy' (Sanders 1999:  
18 5), coverage of the black struggle had become increasingly mainstream from the 1970s  
19 onwards, escalating public campaigns to boycott sporting events and imported goods from  
20 South Africa (Fieldhouse 2005). It would have been difficult not to have been aware of the  
21 growing support for the anti-apartheid movement developing in Britain and internationally  
22 (Thörn, 2006). At the same time, the coherence of whiteness was becoming contested in  
23 Britain, as black and Asian in-migration rose. Against a background of growing national  
24 debates on democracy, the meanings of race, racism and possibilities of multiculturalism, a  
25 decision was taken by this group to migrate to a hardened racist regime, where whiteness was  
26 explicitly mobilised as a resource in the securing of privilege. Migration was undoubtedly,  
27 therefore, bound up with choices about identities and performances of whiteness.  
28

29 The decisions to be made were far from 'one off' but continued to need remaking. The  
30 apartheid state changed considerably between the 1960s and the 1980s: while in the '60s and  
31 first half of the '70s British migrants arrived at a country which was prosperous and, on the  
32 surface, economically and politically stable, from the late 1970s onwards the deepening  
33 entrenchment of racial segregation policies delivered political and economic turmoil  
34 (Conway and Leonard 2014). The increasingly challenging economic context and  
35 strengthening of black political action tested orthodoxies of whiteness, raising interrogations  
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1 of its meanings and automatic relations with power and privilege (Steyn 2001). Indeed, the  
2 eventual ending of the apartheid regime occasioned ‘a radical shift in identity construction  
3 among whites, whose comfortable social supremacy [became] discredited as racism’ (Pillay  
4 and Durrheim 2013: 55). With whiteness publicly shamed and stigmatised (ibid), how white  
5 people position themselves within the new discursive terrain has been the subject of much  
6 critical investigation (Steyn 2004; Jansen 2009; McEwen 2013).  
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11 Research on racism more generally reveals that *denial* is a common white discourse,  
12 occurring at both the individual level as well as within institutional and political spheres  
13 (Nelson 2013). Studies across international contexts such as Australia, the Netherlands,  
14 Scotland and New Zealand identify that, within contemporary talk about race, denial of  
15 racism is a pervasive tactic to avoid charges of operating in racist terms (van Dijk 1992;  
16 Augoustinos and Every 2007). This paper builds on these investigations, arguing that the  
17 South African context provides additional nuance in the identification of the discourses and  
18 tropes through which the territories of whiteness operate. While the persistence of overt  
19 racism within the nation challenges the ability of white people to position themselves within  
20 discourses of outright denial, the ways in which racialized systems, past and present are  
21 *reimagined* function to curate and sustain white subjectivities in relation to privilege.  
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### 32 **Conceptualising whiteness in South Africa**

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35 While ever cautious of constructing an epistemology based on a form of ‘exceptionalism’  
36 (Nuttall 2001: 116), the specificity of the South African historical and political context  
37 reveals how whiteness functions as a material and structural form of ‘governmentality’, ‘a set  
38 of apparatuses and technologies, the aim of which is the regulation of the everyday  
39 perceptions, imaginations, and behaviours of people on a large scale’ (Nuttall 2001: 118;  
40 Posel 2001). In apartheid South Africa for example, through a concatenation of discursive,  
41 institutional and legislative methods, the white state ensured that racial segregation was  
42 visibly and overtly embodied, performed and maintained through the material and cultural  
43 practices of everyday life (Posel 2001). As well as operating to govern others, whiteness also  
44 provides the apparatus for white people to manage themselves. However, whilst most  
45 research on white social positionality explores the strategies by which people secure  
46 advantage and maintain dominance (e.g. Ballard 2004b, Steyn and Foster 2008), it is also  
47 recognised that subjectivities of whiteness are multiple and complex, and that a range of  
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2 alternative subject positions and performances co-exist (Nuttall and Michael 2000, Nuttall  
3 2001, Twine and Gallagher 2008; Peens and Dubbeld 2013).

4 Some inspiring scholarship has identified how ‘whiteness in South Africa differs from  
5 Western contexts in that it is more obvious in its potency: self-conscious rather than  
6 deliberately obscured and accepted rather than veiled as a site of privilege’ (Salisbury and  
7 Foster 2004: 93). At the same time, it is recognised that ‘whiteness in South Africa’ is by no  
8 means a unified category, but is fractured historically, geographically, politically, religiously  
9 and economically as well as by language and (sometimes precarious) identifications with  
10 other nations (Steyn 2001). While some position themselves simply as ‘South African’, many  
11 also self-identify as Afrikaners, Russian Jews, Italians, Portuguese or British (Conway and  
12 Leonard 2014; van der Westhuizen 2017). Since the collapse of apartheid, and with it the  
13 singular, dominant ‘master narrative’ of whiteness, Steyn (2001) suggests that the diversities  
14 between performances of whiteness have become more multiple and nuanced. Politically and  
15 culturally, there now exist many shades of whiteness in South Africa.

16  
17 That white identities are plural, dynamic, situationally and contextually produced, and subject  
18 to renegotiation, is well recognised in the Critical White Studies (CWS) literature  
19 (Frankenberg 1993, Bhopal 2018). The key point of interest here, making connections with  
20 this body of work but also contributing to its breadth of focus, is that post-apartheid South  
21 Africa is in a different historical and political moment to the contemporary dynamic of the  
22 North, where recent electoral and political events have demonstrated a noisy rise in the  
23 potency and open ‘acceptability’ of right wing and populist mobilization. Song (2014) argues  
24 that racialized discourse in the UK and the US is framed by ‘a culture of racial equivalence’,  
25 through which the playing field between whites and Others is deemed to have levelled or  
26 even tipped in favour of non-whites, and readjustment is thus sought (see also Garner 2017).  
27 While, as I go on to discuss, elements of this discourse certainly infuse the talk of white  
28 South Africans, this is against the dominant public discourse that apartheid, and the racial  
29 segregation and racism it spawned, has been universally condemned as a ‘monstrous’ regime.  
30 Here, whiteness has been very publicly disgraced and displaced, and the official political  
31 system is one of black rule (Pillay and Durrheim 2013).

32  
33 A key focus of CWS in the North is to grapple with the ways in which normative (invisible)  
34 whiteness works to perpetuate embedded racism within its institutions (Rhodes 2013). For  
35 example, as stated above, Nelson (2013) argues that *denial* is a significant feature of modern  
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1 racism. Building on van Dijk's (1992) typology, she identifies four discourses by which  
2 denial of racism operates: temporal deflection: minorities today experience less racism than  
3 in the past; spatial deflection: racism is worse in other countries or regions; deflection from  
4 the mainstream: racism is only a problem with a small group of people; absence: outright  
5 dismissal of racism. While Nelson offers a valuable conceptualisation for the strategies of  
6 whiteness within these settings, the self-conscious and unveiled nature of South African  
7 whiteness (Salisbury and Foster 2004) highlights the need for further granulation within  
8 frameworks of analysis, to understand 'the nuanced and locally specific ways in which  
9 whiteness as a form of power is deployed, performed, policed and reinvented (Twine and  
10 Gallagher 2008:5) across both North and South. Within this mission, in the remaining  
11 sections of the paper, I explore the discourses mobilised by a sample of white British-born  
12 South Africans in their narratives of the changing political and social regime. I revisit 30  
13 interviews which I conducted between 2009 and 2012<sup>1</sup> as part of a larger project exploring the  
14 meanings of whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa (Conway and Leonard 2014).  
15 Participants of both long and short-term residence were accessed through a combination of  
16 online advertising and snowballing under the banner of 'being British in South Africa'. The  
17 vast and speedy response we received revealed the traction that a British identity still holds  
18 for some, further supported through often very lengthy qualitative ethnographic and  
19 biographical interviews wherein participants talked openly about their attitudes and  
20 experiences. I am not, of course, claiming that these interviews are in any way representative  
21 of generalised attitudes of white British-born people in South Africa. Rather, the aim is to  
22 generate an intensive examination of a range of 'cultural voices' (Prasad 2005: 90) to develop  
23 theoretical understanding of their positions. The approach taken is to understand race, as with  
24 nationality and gender, as co-constructive, such that raced identities and positions are  
25 constructed and negotiated through social structures, interactions and practices, both  
26 discursive and material. The focus in this paper is the role of discourses, or 'practices that  
27 systematically form the object of which they speak' (Foucault 1972: 49), and how, within this  
28 sample, these are deployed to make sense of the world by shaping meaning and, therefore,  
29 power relations.

### 30 **Reimagining Racial Segregation**

31 Through my thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, I identified four discourses by  
32 which respondents described their relationship to racial segregation and social  
33 transformation. What was striking were the ways in which racialized systems, past and  
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1 present, were not denied, but reimagined and thus recast through the ways in which  
2 participants positioned historical and political events and their own role within these. Their  
3 discourses were in the main constructed at an individual level, although on occasion blurred  
4 into encompassing a broader social group of white people. Consequently, building on  
5 Nelson's (2013) typology of societal-level discourses, I categorise the four discourses as:  
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- 8 • *temporal reimagination*: racism in the past was not as bad as was made out and a  
9 return to the 'good old days' is desired by both blacks and whites
  - 10 • *boundary reimagination*: the racism of other groups (e.g. Afrikaners) is worse and  
11 racialized systems are a consequence of their beliefs, not ours
  - 12 • *acceptance*: racial segregation exists but is accepted as it delivers privileges to whites
  - 13 • *social reimagination*: racial segregation exists but social change is possible
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24 The discourses operated in an 'intertextualised' way: that is, people did not neatly position  
25 themselves within a single discourse but cross-currents of others were apparent (Baxter  
26 2006). However, it was often the case that one discourse emerged as more significant in a  
27 respondent's story and so, in the following discussion, I draw on these as exemplifications.  
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### 31 *Temporal reimagination*

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34 Steyn (2013) notes that some white South Africans claim ignorance of what was happening  
35 during apartheid, thus generating a 'feel-good' history for whites. While, as I explain above,  
36 it would have beggared belief for British migrants during the apartheid regime to claim  
37 ignorance of its existence, some I spoke to, through the strategy of *temporal reimagination*,  
38 attempted to recraft the past as 'not as bad as it was made out to be' in the British/world  
39 press. Moira, for example, migrating to South Africa in the late 1960s to establish a safari  
40 park, argued that what she found was actually no different from any other Western context:  
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48 In some ways [the South African Government] were too good at communicating, because  
49 I don't think that racialism was any worse here, but the mistake was giving it a name:  
50 'apartheid'. Rather than trying to shovel it under the carpet and say, 'oh no, it doesn't  
51 exist', they were honest about it, upfront about it and said, 'yes it exists, we know it exists,  
52 we're going to support it and we're going to give it a name!'  
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55 It must be recognised that for those who arrived during the 1960s and early 70s, the apartheid  
56 system was at that time relatively 'low' compared to the heights of violence reached in the  
57 late '70s and '80s (Conway and Leonard 2014). Perhaps because of this, as well as the fact  
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1 that whiteness in Britain was normalised and unacknowledged as a racial category, a key  
2 response among long term residents, when asked about apartheid, was to attempt to de-  
3 problematise it by minimising its effects. Moira, for example, was keen to inform me that  
4 blacks and whites mixed freely and, further, that their access to space was no different to that  
5 of the whites:  
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10 I used to go down into Pretoria, do my shopping and just window shop! And what  
11 fascinated me, I think more than anything else, was the fact that it was multi-racial, there  
12 were blacks and whites walking around without any obvious animosity and in fact,  
13 looking at some of the little black teenage girls walking around, they were better dressed  
14 than I was!  
15

16 Moira's description of downtown Pretoria imagines an unracialised spatial freedom, despite  
17 the stringent pass laws which operated to regulate black access to urban space. Yet whilst the  
18 legal context is later acknowledged in Moira's narrative, its discriminatory nature is  
19 recreated:  
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25 I was talking to this Afrikaner guy one day about blacks having passes, because this is  
26 something that always comes up, why do the blacks have to have passes? He put his hand  
27 in his pocket and he said, 'there's my pass, it's just that we call it an identity document'.  
28 Everyone had to have one, it wasn't just the blacks, and we still have to have them today.  
29 So, it wasn't just the blacks and the coloureds that had to have passes!  
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32 Steyn (2004) notes how 'white talk' 'undertakes ideological work to minimise damage to  
33 'white privilege and maximise group advantage' (2004: 70) and it was clear from my  
34 interviews that, in relation to post-apartheid, the British-born South Africans I talked to were  
35 also adopting a set of tactical positions. Temporal reimagination featured as a trope, often  
36 mutating in the contemporary moment into a form of apartheid nostalgia: things were good  
37 under the system and most people, black and white, accept that its demise has therefore been  
38 'a mistake'. Dick and Susan, for example, also in their seventies, are very comfortably settled  
39 in Kwazulu-Natal, surrounded by a community of other British-born residents and well  
40 looked after by their black 'helpers', Elijah and Christmas. Whilst local life generally passes  
41 peacefully, it is punctuated by the occasional violent incident, such as burglary and,  
42 occasionally, fatal attack. Susan thinks crime has got worse post-apartheid, and wonders, 'do  
43 we need a double-barrelled shotgun, just in case?':  
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55 Elijah and Christmas say they were a lot better off under the Brittos, the white guys,  
56 because then – well there was law and order then you see. They had their *dompas*<sup>ii</sup>, but  
57 they knew where they stood. It was interesting to hear them say that. Then they wouldn't  
58 get robbed on the way home for their wages as they might do now. There was more  
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1 security because there was more control. I mean the police, you can't trust them now.  
2 And they [the blacks] suffer more than we do in many ways.

3  
4 The major trope underpinning Susan's diatribe is the continued need for a strong, united  
5 white response to the violent onslaught which the ending of apartheid has unleashed against  
6 the white communities, myopically here conflated into 'the Brittos'. The material and  
7 legislative remnants of the old regime, reimagined as a benign and secure system for both  
8 whites and blacks, continues to haunt and reanimate ideas about the community and nation  
9 that now exists. However, whilst this predominantly 'us' versus 'them' position has a clear  
10 resonance with the discourses of apartheid, by also claiming the existence of a *black* nostalgia  
11 for apartheid, a pseudo racial solidarity is claimed to avoid any charge of racism (van Dijk  
12 1992).

### 21 *Boundary reimagination*

22  
23 The second discourse constructed by participants was one of *boundary reimagination*:  
24 apartheid and its offspring, ongoing racialized zones in contemporary South Africa, are both  
25 'nothing to do with me'. This strategy, demonstrated by Stephen's quote at the start of the  
26 paper, positions apartheid as the policy of an Afrikaans-led government, thereby displacing  
27 British-born whites into an alternative ('just visiting') community with little responsibility for  
28 its creation or demise. Boundary reimagination offers a position of marginality which can be  
29 simultaneously empowering: the problem of racism lies with others, allowing the British to  
30 position themselves within a 'myth of tolerance' (Essed 1991) and claim the moral high  
31 ground. Associated with this, most of the people I talked to had never become South African  
32 citizens and, as such, do not have the vote. A position of *not political*, disengaged from any  
33 sort of political participation or identification, was an almost ubiquitous and unsolicited  
34 ululation amongst respondents, of both long and short-term residence, often offered to justify  
35 their earlier tolerance of, or complicity with, apartheid and the privileges it delivered:  
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48 'I wasn't really interested in politics.... blow the politics! All my life, perhaps a terrible  
49 thing to admit, I haven't really been interested in people, what people do, how they act,  
50 what they do, let them get on with it, I'm just interested in having animals around. So,  
51 blow apartheid, I wanted an animal!' (Moira)

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54 Similarly, the ongoing sustainability of racial segregation is attributed to the failing policies  
55 of the contemporary government rather than the actions of individuals. The supposed  
56 'incompetence' of the African National Congress (ANC) to manage and run the country in  
57 accordance with the expectations of the 'first world' is a prevalent narrative which not only  
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1 characterised the interviews but is also captured in the ‘white talk’ of the national press more  
2 broadly (Steyn and Foster 2008). Blaming the institutions of governance, while  
3 simultaneously disassociating themselves from these, is an important discursive tool to  
4 mitigate against accusations of personal acts of racism (Nelson 2013). British nationality was  
5 important here, frequently mobilised as part of the toolkit of boundary reimagination,  
6 whereby features of the current system were demonised as the behaviours of others. Neil, an  
7 engineer in his 40s illustrates:  
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13       There’s a lot of corruption because there isn’t the money or resources to give to people.  
14       One time I was driving back from work, and I was pulled over by a metro cop and he  
15       asked me questions like, “where you come from?” and then he says “it’s Friday isn’t it?  
16       I’m thinking I’m gonna have some beers tonight!” He was like, “do you have any  
17       money?” and it was like begging, begging...police begging. It makes me annoyed and  
18       when I go to the UK and I see the police pull someone over, I feel like *that* is how it  
19       should be done, you know, not like what you see in this country.’  
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24 A challenge for white people in South Africa is managing the “‘baggage’ of the accumulated  
25 traces and relics of past selves while remaining virtuous through one’s own continual  
26 reanimation’ (Kelly and Riach 2014:15). For many of my British respondents, this involved  
27 crafting the self carefully to dissociate from any sense of citizenship, and hence implication,  
28 in South African systems and processes, then and now.  
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### 34 *Acceptance*

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37 In contradistinction, however, I found a distinctive feature of the talk of some was to openly  
38 acknowledge an *acceptance* of racial segregation. There was a classed and gendered aspect to  
39 this: South Africa’s immigration policies under apartheid welcomed the skills of the (male)  
40 white working classes and British migrants suffering the economic volatilities of the 1970s  
41 and 80s had much to gain in terms of occupational, career and, hence, class mobility (Peberdy  
42 2009). Many were unapologetic of their acceptance of the system by which this was  
43 achieved. I chat to Richard, a retired manufacturer in his seventies, at a very exclusive and  
44 predominantly white Country Club in Johannesburg:  
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52       I come from the East End of London, so there's a huge difference between where I was  
53       brought up to let's say, Port Elizabeth. So you're by the sea for a start. And the life, let's  
54       be honest about it, I'm not one of those people who will shrink form that part of South  
55       Africa's history, it was brilliant! If you come to a country where you've got blue skies and  
56       you've got sea and you've got beaches and you've got a wonderful way of life with a maid  
57       and everything is quite a zillion times cheaper than the UK; you think this is paradise! And  
58       it really was. So politics aside, there's nobody that was in that period from the '70s right up  
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1 until '90s who can say that they didn't like the country, because it was very good to them at  
2 that time, let's make no bones about it.

3 In contrast to the fears that had escalated within white communities in the period leading up  
4 to 1994, daily lives and material circumstances have, for many whites, remained untouched.

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7 Kevin, a prosperous builder in his fifties explains:

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10 Sitting round the supper table, which we do a lot in South Africa, all the negativity! You  
11 know, "When the blacks come in this is going to happen, that's going to happen". And  
12 nothing really changed. All that's changed is the word 'Apartheid' is not there. The  
13 whites still go to their pub, the blacks still go to their pubs. You've got the up-market  
14 restaurants where now, there's a mixture. But if I go around the corner to my local  
15 watering hole, I would say about 90%, 95% are whites. They tend to stick to where their  
16 friends are and what they want. So, in that way there's nothing changed much.

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19 Kevin himself has strong working-class roots, having migrated in the 1980s from the  
20 depressed north-east of England looking for work. He draws on this background to justify  
21 why he quickly accepted the prevailing regime and the opportunities it offered for people like  
22 him. Now, 30 years later, he is the 'baas' of his own firm. Surveying his large house in the  
23 northern suburbs of Johannesburg, he rationalises: 'I could never have this lifestyle at home!'  
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25 Stephen also enjoyed 'a bit of class-hopping' by coming to South Africa and realises how  
26 much he has benefited:  
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33 So occasionally I ask why I am still here. I know the answer, it's because my kids go to  
34 fantastic schools and I'm now fifty-something and have ten cars in the garage. There are  
35 things that you can do in a place like this that you cannot do in a place like London'.  
36

37  
38 Some respondents explained that although they *were* shocked when they first arrived in South  
39 Africa, they soon came to recognise how the system offered them substantial benefits. Jean  
40 (60s) confesses with some honesty:  
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44 What has struck my husband and I in later years is that it was very easy to accept the  
45 option that made life comfortable for us. So, one very easily forgot one's objections and  
46 accepted, accepted the status quo, because we were comfortable. Because of the townships  
47 and the locations, one didn't come into contact with a lot of black people, maybe the tea  
48 girl or the company driver, but you didn't meet very many black people, certainly not  
49 professional, middle-class people, they were all in exile, so one wasn't aware of what they  
50 were suffering, or what their problems were. And they didn't say much, I suppose they  
51 were frightened to, so we got on with our lives, and accepted what was really quite nice  
52 for us.  
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56 Jean now deplores her previous position and has tried to make amends by working actively  
57 within her local mixed community. She explains that she is attempting to eschew the dualistic  
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1 perspectives of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and adopt a more radicalised position towards South Africa’s  
2 embedded racialisation.  
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#### 4 *Social reimagination* 5 6

7 A minority of respondents took a position of *social reimagination* from the start, however.  
8 Their stories underline the diversity of positions and white subjectivities and how the  
9 experiences and ideas of white/British people in South Africa should not be conflated or  
10 foreclosed into a uniform ‘condition’ (Nuttall 2001). As Nuttall (2001) argues, the  
11 amplifications of forms of whiteness which may be at odds with the official orthodoxies must  
12 also be attended to. A salient illustration is provided by Andrew, an engineer who migrated to  
13 the Free State from London in the early 1980s, specifically to challenge apartheid. He  
14 remembers how it was ‘such a different place to the UK’:  
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22 We were in a gold mining area, and there was absolutely no mixing between whites and  
23 blacks: it was very, very segregated, even the small shops, they’d have like the normal sort  
24 of white area and then a little sort of window with a ledge where the black people could go  
25 and buy their loaves of bread and things like that. That was a shock: a real eye-opener.  
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28 Andrew’s job often took him into a black township near Johannesburg, which was unusual  
29 during apartheid:  
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31 I used to go down to the black surveyor and the engineer, I could go round their houses  
32 because I had the permit to go into the township. Otherwise you didn’t go into the  
33 township and you would get into trouble if you did... it suited me actually, because it  
34 allowed me to see what I was really wanted to see. So, I was very lucky in that respect.  
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38 Andrew spent his evenings drinking in Soweto and soon made friends, despite the obstacles  
39 mixed relationships faced:  
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41 If we wanted to socialise we’d go into Lesotho because there, there was no segregation.  
42 So, we, just like you would with any group of friends, you get in a minibus or a couple of  
43 cars or whatever and off you go. And I used to travel with them in the same vehicle,  
44 which might sound like it’s nothing, but there were laws. We were often stopped by police  
45 on the way.  
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49 When Andrew met the woman who eventually became his wife, he continued to refuse to  
50 abide by the prevailing laws of the time and moved to live in Soweto:  
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54 As a white man, a black woman was not allowed to ride in the front seat of a car, she had  
55 to go in the back seat. So driving around with my wife-to-be, we’d get stopped, and it  
56 would be, “What’s she doing in there?” The police were pretty nasty. Gave you a hard  
57 time, I’d guess you’d say. I was rumoured to be one of perhaps two or three white people  
58 who were in one way or another living in Soweto. But I didn’t think anything of it in those  
59 days. Didn’t have any fear of getting into trouble or being caught doing something that I  
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1 could be told off for. Didn't really cross my mind because it was like, well, that's what I  
2 wanted to find out about and I did.

3 For others, it has taken the post-apartheid context to force a rethinking of hegemonic  
4 assumptions and reimagine the society. As Jean explains: 'we all have weaknesses, we all  
5 make mistakes in life and we all have struggles, and we've had to change a lot. Coping with  
6 South African society is a huge challenge...but we are trying to give back to the country  
7 something of the great benefits we've had'. Some of the newer migrants had come to South  
8 Africa specifically to be part of the changing regime and to witness history being made.  
9 Amongst these there was an almost palpable sense of what could be achieved. Laura and her  
10 husband Matt, a missionary, had asked to be sent to Johannesburg, rather than Cape Town, so  
11 that they could live and work in the place 'where South Africa is really changing, where  
12 you're actually going to make a difference, really engage in South Africa!' Rejecting the  
13 northern suburbs where most white residents cluster, the couple live in Sophiatown, a black  
14 suburb which became legendary during the struggle. They are clearly enjoying being part of  
15 building a new society:

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28 'there's a sense that everybody's invited to join in the history– you're very close to history  
29 being made here because it's in the making. You can taste it in your – that edge of meeting  
30 people. Everybody's making an effort and moving forwards – it's an opportunity –  
31 everyone says the opportunity is here to be grabbed and you're quite close to the people  
32 who are trying to grab the opportunities.'

### 33 34 35 **Conclusion**

36  
37 Although apartheid ceased well over twenty years ago, this research shows how the regime's  
38 legacy continues to inflect the narratives of its sample of British-born South Africans, both in  
39 the re/making of memories about the past as well as in constructions of the present. The  
40 relationship with apartheid is complex: whilst it is clear that it was, and still is, a defining  
41 feature of their lives, for most there is scant acknowledgment of any agency in its production.  
42 In contrast, a range of discursive techniques are deployed by which a position 'on the edge' is  
43 imagined. The aim is to remove themselves from the responsibility that accompanies power  
44 and privilege, and the centre of production of the trenchant racism from which they  
45 benefitted.

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1 support for, the struggle. In reconceptualising the streets of 1960s Pretoria, or the African  
2 bush, as spaces of pleasure, to be enjoyed equally by whites and blacks alike, the decision to  
3 migrate and settle in a highly racist and discriminatory regime is sanitised, even made  
4 rational. A similar, but more individualistic, tactic is to reimagine boundaries and position  
5 oneself as a ‘visitor’, a stranger in a foreign land, thereby locating apartheid as beyond the  
6 remit of personal responsibility.  
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11 Others openly admit the system was unfair and that they enjoyed its substantial material and  
12 social benefits. Whilst this goes some way to acknowledging complicity, by reifying  
13 apartheid rather than constituting it as a process which required ongoing participation and  
14 maintenance, a lack of responsibility for it is also negotiated. Those that claim that they tried  
15 to challenge apartheid, as well as support contemporary strategies for a racially equal society,  
16 still reveal a sense of entitlement to travel and live as they please.  
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23 The self-positioning of the British as *outside* of South African social structures and politics  
24 continues to dominate the narratives about the present. This disengagement, and the lack of  
25 acknowledgement of the need to hold themselves and each other to account, and critically  
26 challenge how their own practices may contribute to the ongoing production of privilege  
27 racism in South Africa is in itself a highly political and racialised act. It reinforces a position  
28 within the social structure of complicity with white privilege, tragically denuding British-  
29 born South Africans of the opportunity to reimagine the meanings of whiteness and  
30 nationhood in the post-apartheid context .  
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43 <sup>i</sup> The larger research project, funded by the British Academy, was conducted with Daniel  
44 Conway. I focussed on British born South Africans Johannesburg and Kwazulu-Natal and  
45 Daniel focussed on Cape Town.

46 <sup>ii</sup> Dompas, literally meaning ‘dumb pass’ were the pass books that black people were required  
47 to carry under apartheid  
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