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White South African Refugee Claims to Marginalisation: A Case of Re-Racialisation

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Abstract

South Africa has relatively recently transitioned from a condition of legislated racial stratification to a democracy in which all South Africans now enjoy political enfranchisement. While political emancipation has been achieved, economic and social emancipation remain elusive for the majority of Black South Africans who still bear the brunt of poverty and deprivation. South Africa's white colonial communities, having relinquished political power, continue to retain and enjoy economic and social class privileges. Despite state-driven social cohesion and nation-building initiatives, the envisaged 'rainbow nation' (a metaphor coined by the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu) is becoming an increasingly fragile social aspiration. Historical legacies, especially regarding white affirmation, wealth accumulation, and the imperative for economic redistribution and land reform, have become key flashpoints in contemporary South Africa. This paper addresses the issue of how South Africa's corrective justice and affirmative action policies are re-racialised into narratives of reverse racism, white persecution, and white genocide. It examines how racial arbitrage works where whiteness is systematically re-racialised and traded for its value in a different country context. It examines how disillusioned white South Africans leverage white racial and class privilege for transnational mobility and protections, white settler-colonial receptivity and white nationhood. It draws attention to the tensions and contradictions in global asylum regimes, illuminating transnational networks of privilege and economic superpower coercion.

**Keywords:** racialisation; re-racialisation; refugee; class; privilege

Received: 13 October 2025

Revised: 19 November 2025

Accepted: 29 November 2025

Published: 2 December 2025

Citation: Maistry, Suriamurthee Moonsamy. 2025. White South African Refugee Claims to Marginalisation: A Case of Re-Racialisation. *Genealogy* 9: 143. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy9040143>

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1. Introduction

This article analyses the case of the recent granting of refugee status to a group of 49 white South Africans by the United States of America (USA). It examines the tension between perceptions and claims of precarity and marginalisation by a historically privileged white sector in South Africa (SA) and the country's mission of social cohesion and economic redress. It reflects on how the take-up by the US of these claims of marginalisation reaffirms the US's racialised immigration policies and the violation of the foundational human rights principle of the protection of vulnerable populations, irrespective of race.

The specific contribution of this paper is its application of the concept of racialisation to analyse the process of leveraging race and class privilege and the theorization of racial arbitrage. The argument is that in the context of the 49 white South African refugees, a particular kind of racial arbitrage is at work in which whiteness is being systematically re-racialised and traded for its value in a different country context (USA). Re-racialisation is a process where race as a signifier is deliberately and expediently invoked to serve the

interests of the invoking agents. This happens in contexts or societies that have emerged from conditions of racial prejudice and are working towards dismantling racial categorisations and historical racial hierarchies that such societies might have endured. In the case of post-apartheid South Africa, its socioeconomic and racial redress policies are designed to address centuries of white injustice and affirm the majority Black population that has suffered under apartheid. Re-racialisation of whiteness becomes a social and political agenda that undermines these social cohesion and social rebuilding initiatives by re-instituting the sovereignty of whites by harnessing selective evidence of white precarity and vulnerability despite overwhelming evidence that South Africa's white community of over 7 million people still enjoys superior social and economic status as compared to their Black counterparts that make up over 40 million people. This kind of racialization gains currency when supported by powerful white nationalist leaders like the US president (Donald Trump) through the special amendment of US immigration policy to accommodate white South Africans claiming persecution.

Arbitrage in an economic sense refers to the purchasing and sale of the same asset in different markets to gain profit with relatively low risk. It refers to the process of taking advantage of the price difference of the same asset in different markets. In the case of the 49 South Africans seeking refuge in the US, racial arbitrage is evident in the perception amongst this group that their relative value that they could command in South Africa has dropped in relation to the value that they might be bestowed with when they relocate to the US. This group of people might be viewed as seizing upon the benefits of a white identity that being in the US might afford.

Omi and Winant offer a useful theoretical and conceptual heuristic to attempt this analysis of shifting conceptions of racialisation (Omi and Winant 2015), an explanation of which is presented in the section that follows.

2. The Ubiquity of Racial Formation

The key point of departure for Omi and Winant (2015) in the theorisation of race is a recognition of both its structural embeddedness and, importantly, that it is essentially a social construction. While race may have coloniser-assigned biological markers such as skin pigmentation and texture of hair, for example, the evolution of race as a concept relies on a concerted social, economic and political project to reify and normalise itself. Of significance is that race as a construct is never static but is subject to continuous reconstruction and realignment. Fanon's oeuvre of scholarship on racial formation reminds us that the colonial project is a sociohistorical one which intentionally created two distinct categories of people, namely those that belong to the zone of being (white colonisers) and colonised peoples of colour in the Global South, who have, since the onset of colonisation, been earmarked for the zone of non-being (Fanon 1952, 1963, 1967, 2021). Historical hierarchization, however, by its very nature of being socially constructed, has the seeds of its own unravelling. In Deleuzian terms, such territorialisation has potential for disruption, a deterritorialization and multiple lines of flight (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Dewsbury 2011)—new creations, transformations and destruction. The processes of territorialisation, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation are complex and influenced by, amongst other drivers, expedience, convenience, and opportunism.

Omi & Winant contend that the ubiquity of racial formation is its manifestation and perpetuation at the macro level in the form of national state policies and institutional practices, norms and values, and at the micro level, namely the social coalfaces in social interactions. Omi and Winant's theorisations have been primarily derived from longitudinal analyses of the US context. While South Africa and the United States have a history of settler colonialism and settler governance in common, much of these countries' histories

also distinguish them. However, Omi and Winant's theory has particular appeal for the current analysis that this article attempts. They asserted more than three decades ago that it had become significant to examine what they describe as the "volatility of contemporary white identities" (Omi and Winant 2015, p. 131). They argued that white identities have not taken on a consolidated universal character and that the assumed privilege that goes with it has eroded due to issues of economic class in particular. White identities have become 'uneven and contested' (Omi and Winant 2015, p. 131).

3. A Brief Methodological Note

In this conceptual inquiry, an attempt is made at a curation of selected theoretical, conceptual and empirical intellectual resources to help ground the analysis of how South Africa's corrective justice and affirmative action policies are re-racialised into narratives of reverse racism, white persecution, and white genocide. As such, this study did not involve fieldwork, primary data collection, or hypothesis testing, as is typically done in traditional empirical inquiries. While this study makes no claim to any sophisticated theory-building, it does attempt a systematic and creative process (Swedberg 2016) and a conservative attempt at theorising a conceptual heuristic. The study draws specifically on racial formation and whiteness as critical integrative constructs (Jabareen 2009) to examine how disillusioned white South Africans leverage white racial and class privilege for transnational mobility and protections, white settler-colonial receptivity and white nationhood. Through a process of conceptual analysis and critique, I attempt a theorisation of racial arbitrage, a situation in which whiteness is systematically re-racialised and traded for its value in a different country context.

4. The Apartheid Racial Project and Its Contemporary Manifestations in South Africa

Racial projects have their roots in ideological discourse that translates into policies that dictate the distribution of resources, the ethos of a nation's institutions, and ultimately, the socioeconomic outcomes of its citizens. Racial projects by their very construction are inherently hierarchical projects that rank and prioritise certain racial groups according to the dictates of the prevailing political hegemon (Omi and Winant 2015). South Africa's most notorious state-driven racial project was that of apartheid, with counterprojects supported by anti-apartheid activism and liberatory movements. The dawn of democracy saw the emergence of a new nationalist rhetoric anchored in multiculturalism, non-racialism, transformation, social cohesion and redress. These overlapping and often contradictory racial projects exist alongside a white minority (mainly Afrikaaner) language, culture and privilege preservation project.

A defining feature of South Africa has been its turbulent history of state-orchestrated racialization—a project of racial segregation under the apartheid system of societal stratification. Superior military power handed down from European motherlands through generations of colonial occupation is what enabled a minority white population to hold the majority non-white population in subjugation. (Liebenberg and De Wet 2012). Over three hundred and fifty years of colonial oppression and conscious social engineering morphed into continued white settler rule up to 1994.

The current SA population is just over 63 million, comprising 81% Black, 8.5% Coloured, 7.5% white and 3% Indians/Asians (STATS SA 2024). The arrival of people from India in 1860 was the initiative of the British. They were euphemistically referred to as indentured labourers but were in fact bona fide enslaved people with no political rights, tasked to labour on British sugar cane plantations on the east coast of South Africa (Maistry 2023). The arrival of the first white colonisers in 1652 at the Cape (the southern

tip of South Africa) spawned the creation of a mixed race legally defined as the Coloured community under apartheid.

[Maistry and Le Grange \(2023, p. 6\)](#) assert that

“The Coloured race has become a ‘normalised’ reference to a community of over five million people with a multi-racial ancestral history . . . a product of White colonisers, enslaved people from Indonesia and Malaysia and indigenous Blacks (particularly Khoisan)”.

Author and le Grange explain their discomfit with compressing centuries of “wilful sexual exploitation (of indigenous peoples)—a rape and discard/abandon mentality of white colonial predatory perpetrators over an extended period of time” ([Maistry and Le Grange 2023, p. 6](#)). The irony in this is stark as it reflects a white rejection and dehumanisation of the very offspring that they had created and proceeded to racially categorise as inferior to genetically ‘pure’ whiteness.

Land dispossession and restricted land ownership was a key aspect of the apartheid racial project. The Natives Land Act of 1913 decreed that only 7% of all land could be owned by Blacks, which increased to 13% by the 1936 Native Trust and Land Act. In essence, the minority white coloniser population had systematically, through apartheid legislation, secured 87% of the land of South Africa, rendering the indigenous Black population in a perennial state of economic despair. Arguably, the most telling and enduring feature of the apartheid racialization policy was the physical separation of the different races, which was enforced through the infamous Group Areas Act of 1950 and the Bantu Homelands Policy, with the indigenous Black community being shunted into designated geographical areas (Bantu homelands)—under-resourced and deprived a locations that ensured that Black socioeconomic development remained firmly suppressed. Within mainland South Africa, towns and cities under white municipal leadership followed the national blueprint of spatial segregation, with separate residential areas for the four racial groups.

Over the sustained period of apartheid policy, inequality has become a structural fixity. Educational, political and economic dominance by the minority white community had asserted itself substantively in the social, cultural, sporting, educational and economic sectors, even maintaining this economic hold well into the democratic era. White commercial farmers possess 35,000 farms, making up 72% of all commercial agriculture ([Burnett 2022](#)). Of significance for this paper is that white farmers make up only 1% of the entire white population. The white minority also controls more than 80% of the service and industrial sectors (including land ownership), tourism, and financial and banking industries ([Majavu 2023](#)). Reddy reminds us that “despite making up less than 8% of the population, most large-scale capitalists in South Africa, however defined, are white” ([Reddy 2025, p. 279](#)). While the public sector has undergone some transformation and shifted its demographic profile to reflect the national profile, the economic sector remains dominated by the white minority. In an incisive account, Majavu laments the reluctance of the SA academe to foreground race as a legitimate category for analysing inequality in post-apartheid SA ([Majavu 2023](#)). He contends that in this era, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) used the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to launder and legitimise racial capitalism”, the outcome of which has been that a “a White middle class to continue to own and manage the means of production and intergenerational wealth, while a Black middle class continues to endure intergenerational poverty and dispossession” ([Majavu 2023, p. 209](#)). Narsai reminds us that “white South Africans possess roughly twenty times the wealth of black South Africans” ([Narsiah 2025, p. 3](#)). Burnett’s assessment of the status of the white community is instructive as he asserts that “(a)long nearly every dimension of difference that is possible to measure, white people are doing dramatically better than Black people” ([Burnett 2022, p. 7](#)). Despite comprising only 9% of the employment active population, whites occupy

65% of the top managerial positions in SA ([Burnett 2022](#)). The abstraction above of South Africa's painful economic, social and political history runs the risk of diluting the intensity of suffering that apartheid had inflicted on people of colour.

The inherited social identities of the different racial groups in the new democratic South Africa present a case of fascinating dynamism, characterised by both contradiction and continuity, especially as it relates to shifting privileges, power, and social and economic status. It is against this political and economic backdrop that this article analyses mutating racialisation with a particular focus on how segments of a previously dominant racial group (white South Africans) are ascribed refugee status by the United States of America, given that the classification of an individual as a refugee is purported to be guided by a set of universal criteria (principles).

Racialization in South Africa was a deliberative project of rigid racial categorisation. Skin pigmentation and hair texture were distinguishing, legally sanctioned features of social and economic hierarchy, with the white citizenry being accorded and ascribed privilege and preferential status across all spheres of life. White coloniser rule was repressive, denying the indigenous Black community and all other non-white inhabitants political rights, enforcing highly restrictive economic opportunities, instituting job reservation policies and imposing glass ceilings on the economic progress of non-white South Africans. The effect over an extended period of time was a debilitating economic stratification, with Blacks (especially women) occupying perennial states of high unemployment and conditions of poverty ([Narsiah 2025](#)).

White coloniser racialization was particularly effective in using education as a key differentiating factor, with education systems purposely designed to be separate and unequal. Asymmetrical educational funding and provisioning were the foundational principles ([Maistry 2022](#)). There is much extant scholarship that compares the intellectual ascendancy of the white population as a result of superior funding, advanced school and university facilities and qualified teaching personnel with the stagnation of the indigenous community by virtue of being exposed over centuries, to sub-standard Bantu education, the primary goal of which was to retain a cohort of cheap unskilled labour, and in the process, hold the Black population in perennial subjugation.

5. Perceptions and Claims of Precarity by a Historically Privileged White Sector in South Africa

The precarity of white South Africans, their agricultural and industrial landownership, and commercial and residential property ownership were pressing issues in the deliberations leading to the formulation of South Africa's first democratic constitution, with private property rights as a central principle that guaranteed white sovereignty over the material possessions (land and capital) they had secured under apartheid and which they disproportionately owned. As such, the wheels were already set in motion at the time to preserve whiteness and economic and social white privilege, irrespective of how this had been accrued. It must be noted that the first democratic government (in 1994) was a government of national unity, with Nelson Mandela as the president and the former FW De Klerk as one of the deputy presidents. They led what can be described as strong, racially inclusive constitutionalism through which the envisioned new South African society would be administered. Land and business dispossession (from whites) did not happen, and land reform, in particular, was absent from the initial policy writings ([Zenker et al. 2024](#)). White economic and social privilege remained and even strengthened as trade sanctions were lifted and free exposure to international markets became a reality for the white dominated SA corporate sector.

In the excerpt below, [Holmes \(2022\)](#) contends that perceptions of precarity are systematically orchestrated and amplified to sustain a particular discourse of violence (farm murders and general crime) against whites in South Africa, despite any compelling evidence to the contrary. Clack and Minnaar remind us “that the primary motive for farm attacks was robbery and that such farm attacks should be dealt with and policed inclusively with all other forms of rural crime” ([Clack and Minnaar 2018](#), p. 103), reaffirming the point that violence in rural farming areas in South Africa is not peculiar to the white community but to other races as well. Indian and Black farm owners and labourers have also been regular victims of violent crime. However, this structural violence on these racial groups do not have the supporting lobby groups to shape the discourse of violence against them. If anything, violence against such individuals is generally accepted as being the outcome of pure criminality as opposed to being politically motivated.

What becomes clear is that subjective violence ([Zizek 2008](#)), the overt, physical manifestation is strategically harnessed for its sensational impact and ability to shape public opinion. The more covert violence, namely that of symbolic violence, is the manipulation of discourse through language, ideology and representation on multiple platforms in a fashion that crafts a particular racialised narrative about the plight of white South Africans. A calculated form of necropolitics ([Mbembe 2020](#)) is at play here, where a particular sovereignty reigns over whose lives are deemed more valuable. In the case under scrutiny, it becomes evident that non-white farm deaths that surpass those of white farm deaths are rendered invisible and more acceptable. The US, as the external, modern, contemporary colonial sovereign, uncritically exercises its position of social and economic power in prioritising what it sees as white endangerment and the loss of white lives as indicators that demand rescue and intervention strategies like the fast tracking of refugee status. In essence, then, public discourse manipulation is intentional and designed to sustain a white vulnerability discourse that simply reproduces racial hierarchies of trauma.

This practice represents deliberate attempts to construct crime as intentional Black on white violence and that the state systematically orchestrates it. It conceals apartheid constructed realities around crime, namely that “(r)acially skewed land ownership remains both a symbol and a practical expression of deep-seated inequalities in South African society that are rooted in the past” ([Zenker et al. 2024](#), p. 3). Breetzke reminds us that apartheid’s “socio-spatial redesign not only racialised South African cities but led to the concentrated disadvantage of the majority black population in certain segregated geographical areas” ([Breetzke 2012](#), p. 299). He argues that in the post-apartheid phase, rising levels of crime in SA can be directly attributed to this historical macro-spatial and socioeconomic inequality. Of significance is that rising crime in the post-apartheid era and the racial composition of its victims are spread across the race groups ([Narsiah 2025](#)).

6. Harnessing Refugeehood as a Resource

Malkki, in her work on refugeehood, argues that a racialised discourse pre-exists and is based on predetermined racialised humanitarian categories through discourse and international and domestic law ([Malkki 1995](#)). The 49 SA citizens who were granted refuge were far from being ‘speechless emissaries’ ([Malkki 2005](#)). If anything, they were active agents in constructing their narrative and were aided by other powerful agents in marketing this for consumption by willing and welcoming audiences in the US. Current US president, Donald Trump, in his first term of office, had expressed concern about the safety and security of white South Africans. This agenda of looking out for the well-being of white South Africans has continued since his re-election and has been buoyed by influencers like South African-born billionaire Elon Musk and pro-white activist lobbies. In Trump’s second term, he swiftly signed an executive order declaring the US’s position on the

resettling of white South Africans seeking refuge, prioritizing them even in the context of his announcement of the capping of US refugee intake from 125,000 to 7500 people per annum. The executive order cited the SA government's alleged egregious actions that might ensue from the release of Expropriations Act 13 of 2024, an act designed to enable the state to expropriate land without compensation for public use. Of significance, though, was that the allegation of white genocide and the swift amendment of US immigration policy was a key racialising moment that elevated and made distinct the complaints of white South Africans, of persecution orchestrated by the Black-led SA government. This was achieved through the selective presentation of video footage of the leader of the predominantly Black Economic Freedom Front (EFF), a minority left-wing political party, whose relatively insignificant parliamentary representation renders it an ineffective (non) decision-maker in or influencer of public policy. As can be expected, the Expropriations Act created much consternation, especially amongst the white-landed community.

Two issues are worth noting. Firstly, the mere fact that this Act came into being three decades after the dawn of democracy is indicative of the relative power of white leverage, as pro-white lobbyists were successful in staving off this legislation for such an extended period of time. It can be argued that the re-racialisation of whiteness as a precarious resource could only happen if the conditions for this re-racialisation process make it possible for this to happen. Legislatively, the SA constitution guarantees freedom of speech, protest and media reporting. Although the role of mainstream media in SA has shifted somewhat after 1994 ([Wasserman and De Beer 2005](#)) from historically serving white Afrikaner nationalist interests, in the main, mainstream media is under the stewardship of the white corporate sector, serving the aspirations of middle-class suburban (mainly white) interests ([Friedman 2011](#)). At a fundamental level, mainstream media does powerful ideological work in reifying whiteness' apex position in the social hierarchy.

The second issue is that when claims of persecution are unverified and not exhaustively examined for the possibility that ulterior motives might underpin such behaviour, then whiteness, white exceptionalism and white endangerment are likely to be reproduced. The South African Constitution is unequivocal in its declaration that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, irrespective of creed, colour, or religion. The imagined racially integrated South African community has, to a certain extent, begun to manifest in the form of racially integrated schools in urban and suburban areas, integrated sports organisations under the banner of a central ministry, a racially integrated higher education sector and a business sector that, through redress and affirmative action policies, has moved towards racial integration.

7. Deliberative Moves at Subverting the National Social Cohesion and Racial Redress Project

Racial integration at the level of government is undoubtedly a defining feature of the South African state, with its uniquely configured government of national unity comprising leadership from all racial constituencies. Having said this, it is not uncommon to find racial tensions in all these social and political spaces, given the country's history of separation of racial groups. That all white people would embrace the new democratic South Africa with the same degree of enthusiasm and that all white people would embrace the notion of Ubuntu (an African value system that advocates for interconnectedness of people through humane care, generosity, empathy and respect), was likely to be unrealistic.

An overwhelming majority of white South Africans have elected to remain in South Africa after 1994. Although white emigration data since 1994 is cloudy, it is estimated that just over a million white South Africans emigrated and that "the white exodus from that country shows signs of a slowdown or even a reversal" ([Zukowski 2020](#)). It must be noted

that there are currently over 4.5 million whites in SA, comprising 7.2% of the country's population. This population size is almost as large as New Zealand's entire population, which stands at 5.2 million people. In essence, the white people that remain in SA are choosing to do so for a host of reasons that are likely connected to the social, economic and cultural status of whiteness that has accrued over the three and a half centuries.

With regard to the case of the 49 white refugees who experienced a sense of erosion of security (and status), what has effectively happened is that a process of inverse racialization is invoked. Whiteness, once bestowed with self-ascribed privilege and dominance, becomes reconstructed by the very (white) agents responsible for initiating and sustaining racialization over the last three and a half centuries—a careful re-narrativization (re-racialization) of whites as victims of willful state persecution.

These deliberative moves undermine and subvert South Africa's attempts at social cohesion and redress. Its land reform, affirmative action and other socioeconomic reform initiatives designed to uplift the previously disenfranchised Black community are reframed as the suppression of whites and a threat to white racial identity and its historical privilege. There is a deliberate disconnect between perceived articulations of precarity and centuries of historical white privilege. Whiteness in this white South African refugee case unashamedly bears no public accountability nor responsibility for the evils of apartheid. Whites have shown limited willingness to share acquired wealth, are contemptuous of redress policies and regularly challenge legislation designed to give effect to redistribution and sharing. Instead, whiteness has recalibrated into racialised white victimhood as a result of the loss of white political hegemony. Claims of victimhood appear to have a somewhat sanitising effect—a moral purification that absolves whites of apartheid atrocities.

This analysis reveals that whiteness is a flexible, malleable commodity that morphs as the circumstances dictate. In this case, it shifts from privileged citizens (under apartheid) to subjected victims in the post-apartheid era, and then back to citizenry privilege as the 49 white refugees take up residence in the US. In effect, racialization of whites serves a particular purpose, namely that of preserving a global asylum gradation and a moral hierarchy of deservingness based on race. With regard to the white SA refugee seekers, the US is viewed as a symbol of whiteness (a haven or settler colonial homeland) that recognises their own whiteness and assumed deservingness. For these white refugee seekers, the move to the US restores the loss of social and political hegemony that was once enjoyed in SA.

8. The Indispensability of Whiteness

The myth of and the façade of class privilege-loss by whites in SA needs further exploration. Credible scholarship indicates that it is a well-constructed façade that whites have experienced any class privilege loss (B-BBEE Commission 2024; Barnard and Luiz 2024). Re-racialization is at work in the constructed narratives of white economic insecurity as it relates to land, personal safety and job security, obscuring historical white privilege while simultaneously reproducing such privilege. In an incisive account, Burnett (2022) contends that

“... white South Africans continue to exploit their considerable economic and cultural power to produce their belonging on the land and the land as belonging to them on a vast scale, ... perpetuating the idea that their continued control ... serves the interest of all social groups. Challenges to the established order are represented as misguided foolishness ... or a mendacious vendetta...”, the outcome of which is likely to be catastrophic for the nation. (Burnett 2022, p. 4)

In essence, powerful discursive machinery is at work that maintains whiteness as an indispensable resource that makes “white dispossession unthinkable within a stable social

order ...” (Burnett 2022, p. 4). The effect of this is to perpetuate the delay in substantive socioeconomic transformation and to excessively exaggerate the imagined potential dire consequences by construing any contestation as aberrant or preposterous.

The contradictions become evident—on the one hand, claims of persecution and vulnerability operate alongside discourses of indispensability and national social contributive communities. Harris’ construct of whiteness as property is instructive as it explains the case of white South Africans who, under apartheid, enjoyed social assertion and legal protection, a situation where whiteness was a near-tangible possession with legal status—a sacred white disposition (Harris 1993). This property function extended to the right to secure employment, entrepreneurial activity, the use of land, the exploitation of cheap Black labour and importantly, the right to exclude and marginalise anyone that was non-white, economically, socially and geographically.

9. The Tension Between the Racialised Immigration Policies of the United States of America (USA) and the Foundational Human Rights Principle of the Protection of Vulnerable Populations, Irrespective of Race

The granting of refugee status to a group of 49 white Afrikaners from South Africa by the US is a fascinating representation of racialization and entrenched whiteness—positioning whites as a social group whose birthright and ancestral heritage are bestowed with privilege and humanity. As such, white suffering gets exaggerated and exploited for its utility, as Holmes describes below.

“... social movement organisations associated with the Afrikaans community, like Afriforum and the Suidlanders, are deeply invested in playing up the extra-lethality of farm violence because of the political utility of activating threat perceptions...”. (Holmes 2022, p. 377)

Sensational violence and selective amplification thereof feed the narrative of white genocide in South Africa. It is harnessed and marketed as a commodity for consumption by target white audiences (the US government, right-wing conservatives and the American president in particular).

Malkki reminds us that asylum, and refugee seeking are not neutral phenomena, but are in fact deeply politicised and racialised (Malkki 1995, 2005), influenced by the relations between countries and the race of the people seeking refugee status. White people are preferred refugees to Blacks and other non-whites by Western European countries, an issue that came to the fore particularly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Balogun 2025). Non-white refugee applicants to countries in the global north are likely to face severe restrictions just because they are non-white (Rosenberg 2024). The preferential treatment given to white South Africans by the US government thus needs to be understood in the context where empathy towards white suffering in relation to Black strife has a historical hierarchical gradation that relegates non-whites fleeing life-threatening political turbulence to the category of less deserving than deserving whites who in the case of the 49 South Africans had not quite met the US’s stringent criteria for granting refugee status (Narsiah 2025). Asylum seeking by this cohort of people is deeply politicised and influenced by historical and current relations between the two countries concerned (SA and the US). As such, the relationship between South Africa and the US has to be understood in the context of historical and contemporary geopolitical tensions. During apartheid, the US, while presenting itself as a strong pro-democracy, anti-racist ally, was at the same time unequivocal in its military support of the white South African government’s vociferous anti-communist agenda (Borstelmann 1993). It must be noted that at the time, the persecution of Black anti-apartheid activists and their applications for refugee status received

far less attention and were addressed with no such urgency as has been the case with the current white refugee applicants.

In the post-apartheid era, the US saw iconic figures like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu as standout examples of politicians who stood for democracy. At the time, the country was welcomed into the international fold. The South African government's recent position on Israel (leading the charge of Genocide in the International Criminal Court) (Jeenah 2024). Moreover, its muted stance on the Russian–Ukrainian conflict has drawn the ire of the US, especially the current ruling US regime. The imposition of high, punitive trade tariffs on SA exports to the US, a move that will undoubtedly affect SA's economy, its workers and the overall socioeconomic wellbeing of its citizens, appears to be somewhat contradictory of the US's stated intent on enabling economic growth and prosperity in SA. The US's weaponisation of aid as a bargaining chip is particularly troubling (Narsiah 2025).

The threat and use of punitive foreign (economic) policies against countries that do not subscribe to or adhere to the US geopolitical agenda has become increasingly brazen and unapologetic. A distinct pro-white racial agenda underscores US foreign policy, including its immigration policy (Johnson 2022). It has undoubtedly been a subject of concern for anti-racist scholars (Samari et al. 2021) and is a phenomenon not peculiar to the US, but prevalent across the globe (Rosenberg 2022). The case of the preferential treatment being accorded to the group of white South Africans reinforces the notion of racial double standards in international asylum and refugee protocols. It also raises the question as to why when whites flee context of strife, such white strife and victimhood gains rapid traction amongst white western nations as was the case of white Ukrainians. This paper is deeply sensitive to and recognises the legitimate flight of Ukrainians to safer country havens, but it draws attention to how whiteness gets upscaled to priority status. The perceived plight of the 49 white South Africans who were granted refugee status by the US is yet another example of the global solidarity of whiteness. In essence, the question of 'refugeeness' is underpinned by a transnational racialization process that determines who is likely to be recognised favourably and instantaneously as a refugee, with whites fleeing conflict (real or fabricated) moving to the front of the queue.

A somewhat confounding issue worth is the relative novelty of the 'plight of white refugee' as a social phenomenon—a phenomenon that has become more pronounced in the recent Russia-Ukraine war and the case of the 49 white South Africans. The concept of refugee has historically been associated with persecuted non-white people fleeing life-threatening political violence, usually in their countries of birth. The US refugee resettlement programme since the Cold War has primarily (though not exclusively) resettled non-white people. The white refuge this presents somewhat as an anomaly. These anomalies are instructive as they point to the fluidity of both the concept of refugee and the notion of whiteness as inherently powerful and privileged. An analysis of the case 49 South Africans, suggests that whiteness can easily be reconstructed and recontextualised and does in fact have the potential to travel as privilege. Fassin asserts that whiteness circumscribes its own benchmarks of humanitarianism, distinct from those ascribed to recognising the plight of non-white suffering and basic conditions of existence (Fassin 2011). He argues that values such as compassion and care are racially coded and mediated by class. As such, universality, neutrality, and a commonly shared understanding of humanitarianism are myths. The global asylum regime is thus inherently contradictory. It is shaped by powerful discursive forces that racialise and re-racialise in a fashion that serves to maintain white as sacrosanct and worthy of apex preservation.

10. Concluding Comments

Hall's Theory of articulation is helpful in pulling the various strands of this article's argument together, as it offers a framework for explaining how somewhat disconnected elements or constructs, such as whiteness, nationhood, humanitarianism, and refugee-hood, are socially reproduced—racialised through manipulation, leverage, and contrived concatenation—into marketable coherence. The case of the 49 South African's seeking refuge in the US demonstrates the power of race. In this instance, whiteness has reaffirmed its power to command and demand recognition, moving to the front of the proverbial line in the queue of humanitarian deservingness, empathy and protection. The case also points to the ability of whiteness for expedient adaptability from powerful socioeconomic dominance and privilege to a re-racialisation as distressed, precarious and in need of international rescue, and back to privilege when whiteness travels transnationally. Whites are presented as vulnerable yet, can employ middle-class assets like the media and local and domestic lobbying networks to construe narratives of rejection (loss of belonging) and lack of protection by the state, thus 'legitimizing' their pursuit of a new homeland (settler-colonial US) that speaks to their sense of whiteness.

White nation-states demonstrate an enormous capacity for receptivity of whites who project themselves as experiencing real or imagined existential crises in the spaces they occupy. Such nation states also expedite resettlement by selectively adapting and changing asylum criteria to accommodate the specific white needs. The case also illuminates the unabashed non-neutrality of the global migration and asylum regime, reflecting its colonial partiality towards whites deemed to be genetically entitled to. It also reveals how global economic superpowers impenitently construct Global South nations as corrupt, violent and incapable of protecting their citizens.

This article revealed the mechanisms of racial arbitrage where whiteness is systematically re-racialised and can be traded for its value in a different country context. It reflects how white power and privilege shift and move but ultimately reassert themselves through particular discursive processes. It also reveals the tensions and contradictions that are present in a politicised global asylum regime and the unapologetic brazenness with which white settler-colonial states live these contradictions. In drawing attention to whiteness' power in this article, the author is acutely aware of how such attention also runs the risk of reinforcing whiteness and the re-racialisation thereof.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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