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# 'Don't call me mzungu': negotiating migration categories and privilege in Nairobi

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores how privileged migrants in Nairobi, Kenya responded to the Kiswahili term 'mzungu', in relation to how Kenyan interlocutors understood and used the term. The paper draws on five months of ethnographic research conducted in 2016. Mzungu carries intertwined connotations of whiteness, socio-economic privilege and foreignness shaped by a specific colonial and neocolonial history. Many migrant interlocutors first encountered the term upon their arrival in East Africa and felt uncomfortable with or outright rejected it; others, however, mobilised the term themselves, often with a semi-ironic distance. As this article argues, such cautious to negative emotional reactions are as revealing of the experience and politics of migration as the positive embrace of identity categories. Specifically, based on the premise that 'words contain worlds' [Gluck, C., and A. L. Tsing. 2009. *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon*. Durham & London: Duke University Press], the paper examines such reactions to gain insight into the lived experience and operation of privilege in migration. Further, the paper calls for research into Global South host contexts and the migration-related categories that operate there to help overcome migrations studies' persistent Western-centric bias.

**KEYWORDS**

Migration categories; privilege; race; class; global south

## Introduction

Migration often includes an encounter with new, foreign-language social categories, which one does not (yet) identify with, but which one nevertheless has to negotiate in bureaucratic contexts and everyday life. This paper discusses such an encounter. It explores how socio-economically and racially privileged migrants in Nairobi, Kenya responded to the Kiswahili term 'mzungu', in relation to how urban, middle-class Kenyan interlocutors understood and used the term. The paper draws on five months of ethnographic research conducted in 2016. While the research project focused on the category 'expatriate', 'mzungu' emerged as a prominent and closely associated category. Mzungu carries intertwined connotations of whiteness, socio-economic privilege and foreignness shaped by colonial and neocolonial history. Many migrant interlocutors

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first encountered the term upon their arrival in East Africa and felt uncomfortable with or outright rejected it; others, however, mobilised the term themselves, often with a semi-ironic distance. As this article argues, such cautious to negative emotional reactions are *as* revealing about the experience and politics of migration as the positive embrace of identity categories. Here, I examine such reactions to gain insight into how migrants and Kenyans negotiate migrants' privileges and the social structures producing them.

The categorisation of migration is a contested exercise with significant material effects. As discussed below and throughout the contributions to this special issue (Mahar and Norum 2026), critical scholarship on migration categories has studied, for example, how migrant categories are produced by the state and policymakers, in corporate and organisational use, in political and media discourse, in academic research, and in socio-cultural contexts. Some research also explores how migrants themselves negotiate and co-create formal and informal categories they encounter upon migration. An example is research on how privileged migrants embrace the term 'expatriate' – while often rejecting the label 'migrant' – to construct a positive migratory identity and community in diaspora space (Cranston 2017; Fechter and Walsh 2010; Kunz 2016, 2020). As Croucher (2012, 4) notes, 'privileged movers' rarely identify as 'immigrants' and prefer instead 'to self-describe simply as, for example,–an American living in Mexico' (see also Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014; O'Reilly 2000). Such research indicates that migrants' relationship to migration categories includes not only a positive embrace but also discomfort or outright rejection (see also Bivand Erdal, Liao, and Abraham 2026). Schinkel (2019, 7) similarly argues that often, 'the subjects of our concerns, our studies, don't recognize themselves in the terms of those concerns and don't think of themselves as … as "immigrant" or as "refugee" … '. Yet, while migrants may not recognise themselves in categories applied to them, they nevertheless have to negotiate them, especially when those categories mediate their encounter with state bureaucracy and host society.

How migrants negotiate such formal and informal categories they do not identify with, or which they might even find offensive, remains under-researched. Helping fill this gap, this paper discusses how relatively privileged Nairobi-based migrants navigate the category mzungu, in relation to how Kenyan interlocutors understand and use the term. Doing so, the paper makes two further contributions. First, based on the premise that 'words contain worlds' (Gluck and Tsing 2009), studying negotiations of mzungu allows insight not only into the everyday lived experience of migration but into wider social structures. Specifically, I leverage this analytical approach to gain insight into the operation and experience of privilege in migration. Second, the paper calls for research in Global South host contexts and the migration-related categories that operate there. The failure of migration studies to consider categories in non-Western languages and contexts, despite these categories' socio-political influence in majority world contexts, reveals the field's persistent Western-centric bias (see also Page 2026; Tu 2026).

The next section reviews relevant literature on the category mzungu, migration categories and privilege, and North–South migration. The paper then introduces the research context, data and methodology. Subsequently, two empirical sub-sections will analyse how migrant and Kenyan interlocutors in Nairobi understood and used the category mzungu.

## From expatriate to mzungu: categories of North-South migration

The categorisation of migration is a contested exercise with significant material effects. Critical research has studied, for example, how migrant categories are produced by the state and policy makers (Castles 2000; El-Enany 2020), by corporations and organisations (Kunz 2023; Redfield 2012), social work agencies and actors (Odierna 2023), in political and media discourse (Blinder 2015; Elrick and Schwartzman 2015), academic research (Bakewell 2008; Kunz 2023; Schinkel 2019), and in socio-cultural contexts which include migrants' own negotiation of said categories (Fechter 2005; Hayes 2018; Hindman 2009; Kunz 2020, 2023). Migration categories, as used in all these domains, do not necessarily, sometimes rarely, correspond to legally, academically or statistically defined categories (Blinder 2015; Kunz 2020). Politicians and many public commentators, as indeed migrants themselves, often deploy categories in convenient rather than what may be considered definitionally 'correct' ways.

The category 'expatriate' has received growing attention from research that has shown how migrants use this category to socially position themselves, draw boundaries and create community in diaspora space (Cranston 2017; Croucher 2012; Fechter 2005, 2010; Fechter and Walsh 2010; Knowles and Harper 2009; Kunz 2016, 2023; Leonard 2010; Redfield 2012). Such research on the category expatriate has shown how individuals, multinational corporations, international NGOs, city and state governments, and academic scholarship use the category 'expatriate' to differentiate between migrants on racialised, gendered and classed grounds, even if distinctions remain ostensibly based on more meritocratic or technical logics including skill, profession and temporality. Such categorisation has been further shown to have implications not only for the people thus classified; it takes part in the hierarchical organisation of access to mobility, work and management across the private and non-profit sectors, and the academic fields producing knowledge on mobility and migration. As I argue elsewhere (Kunz 2020, 2023), drawing on linguistic pragmatism, such socio-linguistic manoeuvres take place on the discursive ground opened up by the flexible and polysemic nature of categories like expatriate and migrant, linguistic characteristics always entangled with wider struggles over power, resources and status. Discomfort with and rejection of migration categories, including 'expatriate', have been less centrally studied in this literature. Yet, categories are contextually produced, with flexible boundaries and internal hierarchies, and discomfort and rejection play an important part in categories' contextual production. For example, as discussed elsewhere (Kunz 2022), while interlocutors in Nairobi did not face state-sponsored pressure to socio-culturally assimilate, many aspired to such integration and consequently rejected the label 'expat' with its potent connotation of an insufficiently integrated, privileged foreigner.

Less attention has been paid to the term mzungu as a category of migration.[1] Across European empires, colonised peoples developed their own terminology for those who colonised them, including the Kiswahili *mzungu* used across eastern and central Africa. Mzungu is often translated as meaning 'white people'. Accordingly, the Oxford English Dictionary (2025, np) translates mzungu as 'A European, a white person' and dates it earliest known usage to the 1860s. Indeed, the imperial explorer Richard Burton, in his 1860 book *The Lake Regions of Central Africa*, equated 'muzungu' with 'white man' (Burton 1860, 26, 565). Etymologically, mzungu/muzungu (sing.)/

wazungu (pl.)[2] is derived from the verb root -zungua, meaning 'to go around', and its use for white people has been traced back to the perceived aimless wanderings of early imperial European explorers on the African continent (Mamdani 1998; Rahier 2021, 456). Mzungu is a common and potent socio-cultural category in East Africa and beyond. Moreover, it is frequently used for the same people called expatriate and reveals a similarly purposeful polysemy and a shared historical moulding by European empire and colonialism and their racialised strategies of rule. Yet, unlike expatriate, mzungu hardly features in the research and vocabulary of migration studies.

While mzungu is frequently equated with the racial category 'white' or its colonial-era equivalent 'European', the two do not fully map onto each other in usage and meaning. Mzungu, like all racial epithets, does not simply connote skin colour or other supposed biological markers of 'race' (Stoler 2016). Instead, it carries a set of meanings and connotations that give race its contextual materiality and power but also evidence its contestation and resistance. Just like 'white' or 'European', mzungu thus acquired multiple, interrelated meanings and varied connotations in the context of European colonialism and neo-colonialism and associated legally and materially privileged settler immigration. Yet, unlike 'white' or 'European', mzungu is primarily the linguistic product of peoples at the receiving end of imperial-colonial domination and exploitation and shaped by their viewpoints. Primarily, mzungu tethers a privileged racialised position but also 'Western' foreignness, economic means and elevated social status. Mzungu has been found to mean 'white person', 'white foreigner', 'privileged Western foreigner', or to denote wealth, high professional status and social status (Fogle, Duffy, and Hunter 2024; Higgins 2011; Kunz 2023; Manley, Morgan, and Atkinson 2016; Omondi and Ryan 2017; Spitzer 2019). Lough and Carter-Black (2015, 6; see also Rahier 2021) found their interviewees 'frequently switched' between using the terms whites, *mzungu*, Westerners, internationals and expatriates.[3] As the above cited literature also reveals, mzungu does not only carry different meanings, but is used with varying intentions: matter-of-factly, mockingly, endearingly, admiringly, self-reflectively and derogatorily. As Fechter (2005, 95) notes about the Indonesian term 'bule', 'the intended meaning crucially depends on the speaker and the social context'. Zambian novelist Namwali Serpell accordingly plays with the historically assembled polysemy of the term mzungu in her 2019 novel *The Old Drift*,

> to play with the expectation that every word must be translated … So there's the sense in which this word – which could be a racial epithet, some people find it derogatory, others find it sort of teasing, others find it merely descriptive – has these contestatory definitions built into it. (cited in Goyal 2020, 44)

Mzungu is also used in ways that trouble any straightforward tethering of whiteness, status and privilege. Higgins (2011, 179) found the term mzungu used for Tanzanians seen as 'overly westernized (and rude)' and Kunz (2023) similarly found 'msungu' used in a 1964 Kenyan parliamentary debate to berate an 'African' doctor demanding the same privileges as 'expatriate' staff. Wagner et al. (2022) found divergent experiences of mixed-race children fathered and abandoned by white United Nations peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Children living comfortably gained in social standing by being read as white, while those who cannot conform to the economic elite status associated with whiteness faced 'aggravated stigma related to poverty and reversed

racial privilege through sanctions' expressed in being called '"Muzungu aliye homba" [white child gone bankrupt]' (Wagner et al. 2022, 669). Similarly, Brocco (2015) found that the intended meaning of labelling people with albinism 'mzungu' in Tanzania depended on their socio-economic status: it could be mocking if they were poor or complimentary if they were well-off.

This paper adds to this interdisciplinary scholarship on the term mzungu through an analysis of privileged foreigners' reactions to being labelled mzungu. This builds on Fechter (2005), discussed above, and Lukate (2023), whose mixed-race and black European research participants relayed surprise and sometimes dismay at being called mzungu. As Lukate (2023, 58) notes, terms like mzungu are also 'directed towards bodies which, within Western, hegemonic logics of race would not be described as White, and therefore in ways that can seem paradoxical and unfamiliar to diasporic people of African descent'. Such a denial of identity, Lukate (2023) argues, can induce a state of precarity and undermine a person's sense of self. Similarly, Fogle, Duffy, and Hunter (2024, 57) analyses their own surprise at being called mzungu as African-American researchers in Zambia,

> though definitions vary, it became clear that I was seen as a Mzungu. I benefitted from the luxuries of Western society and had been influenced by Eurocentric biases because of my upbringing in the US.

Mzungu thus shows that even such seemingly universal racial categories as whiteness are ultimately contextually (un)made phenomena – and it shows the limits of racial logics of white majority societies. It evidences how globalised formations of racism, that continue to reproduce the privilege and power of whiteness, operate within specific socio-cultural contexts. In other words, mzungu is part of how whiteness as embodied property and material and discursive structuring force becomes a lived reality that can appear universal while being contextually dependant (Christian and Namaganda 2023; Pierre 2012).

In sum, mzungu is an impactful term, associated with whiteness but not reducible to it, a protean and polysemic category of migration that is used to make sense of a form of privileged foreignness that is produced within a transnational system of inequality. It is notable that non-European categories, like mzungu, hardly feature in the research and conceptual vocabulary of migration studies. This disregard indicates that not only have Southern host contexts been understudied in migration studies (Schewel and Debray 2024) but so have Southern migration categories, evidencing the field's Global North and state-centric biases (Mahar and Norum 2026). This is the case especially for non-European language categories that are not part of official state discourse, but which nevertheless have socio-political purchase and impact (see also Page 2026; Tu 2026).

## Privileged North-South migration as a challenge to migration studies

Researching how migrants themselves negotiate the categories and concepts applied to them allows insight into these categories, the everyday lived reality of migration, and the social systems migrants navigate and co-produce. It is also a productive way for academics to critically reflect on our own scholarly production. For example, we should

probe if, and with what implications our categories reflect, or not, the self-understanding of those we categorise; and how our categories may reproduce the very power relations we analyse, including the subjugation of (some) migrants within post/colonial structures of inequality that shape migration and the categories we use to study it. As Croucher (2012) already noted, privilege not only shapes migration but also our conceptual vocabulary to talk about and study it, and Lukate (2023, 64) finds that 'naming and framing in academic research is often closely linked to the coloniality of knowledge, that is, the re/production of knowledge which privileges Western, hegemonic knowledge over other forms of knowledge'.

Overcoming the coloniality of migration studies includes a need to (re)think migration from Southern host contexts and their categories. In doing so, this paper speaks to a growing literature on South-South and North–South migration and its analytical challenge to established theories and concepts of migration. Migration scholarship tends to focus on migration from the Global South to the North. This focus belies the importance of other-directional migration. Schewel and Debray (2024) estimate that in 2020, over one-third of all international migrants (98 million people) moved between countries of the Global South – a greater share than South–North migration (92.4 million). In comparison, 66.7 million migrants had moved within the Global North and, although the numerically smallest segment of migration, North–South migration is also significant with an estimated 10.8 million people. Moreover, individuals with Global North passports face much fewer visa restrictions, especially if travelling to the Global South (Mau et al. 2015), and less severe policing of their immigration status once there. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some North–South migrants relocate semi-permanently while legally remaining on a visitor or tourist visa, which implies that the true number of North–South migrants is likely higher than official numbers suggest.

Researching migration dynamics in the Global South is relevant not only because of the sheer number of migrants moving between and to Southern countries, but also because migration has significant socio-political and economic implications here, too (Gagnon and Khoudour-Castéras 2012). Especially, despite their smaller number, Northern migrants in the Global South often occupy privileged economic and social positions with disproportionate influence. Indeed, attention to Southern host contexts is lacking not because immigration is a new phenomenon here or uncontested (ibid.; Campbell 2005; Gould 1988; Jaji 2019; Page 2026). Former settler colonies like Kenya have been 'traditional' immigration host countries for much longer than the much-studied Western Europe. Migration to colonial and independent Kenya – most significantly from Europe, the South Asian subcontinent, and from within eastern Africa – has been a politically, economically and socio-culturally highly consequential process inseparable from European and American imperial and (neo)colonial projects, their contestation, the state-building project and the on-going economic and geopolitical dominance of the Global North in an unevenly integrated capitalist system. Yet, as is the case in other Southern host contexts, surprisingly little research attends to migration to Kenya, and existing research mostly focuses on forced migration (Campbell 2005), side-lining Kenya's significant number of privileged migrants (although see Dickinson 2016; Doro 1979; Gould 1988; Kennedy 1987; McIntosh 2016; Rahbaran and Herz 2014; Uusihakala 1999).

Research in Southern migration contexts has noted North–South migrants' multi-faceted privileges (Amit 2011; Benson 2013; Croucher 2012; Hayes 2018; Lundström 2014). Privilege denotes 'unearned advantage' within a socio-historical structure defined by inequality (Pease 2010). Importantly, migrants' privileges have causes and consequences in both sending and host contexts, as well as the transnational structures that connect the two (Benson 2013; Croucher 2012; Favell 2022; Hayes 2018; Kunz 2022, 2023). Given its structural production, being privileged is not a choice (Bhopal 2018; Koh and Sin 2022), nor does privilege need to be actively claimed or consciously recognised to be effective (Kathiravelu and Dorairajoo 2024). On the contrary, privilege frequently functions and reproduces itself through its non-recognition (Pease 2010, 9) and its study consequently helps understand the latent operation of invisible/normalised inequality (Kathiravelu and Dorairajoo 2024). Privilege is intersectional and context-dependent, with migrants potentially privileged in one dimension or context, yet disadvantaged in others (Benson 2013; Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Leonard and Walsh 2018; Pease 2010). Moreover, some privileges can be transported across contexts more easily, while other times migration means privilege is lost, reduced or gained (Benson and O'Reilly 2016). For instance, individuals may lose or gain in 'whiteness' by moving to a different country; and whiteness itself may change meaning and bring more or less rewards in the new context. Finally, privilege is relative and also privileged migrants face challenges and experience vulnerability (Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Leonard and Walsh 2018) and privilege can be experienced as deeply uncomfortable (Benson 2013; Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Kunz 2022). For example, Koh and Sin (2022, 668) note that while white participants in Malaysia benefited from white supremacy, 'with the privileges, also came discomforts. There is pressure to perform and live up to stereotypical representations, and a certain loneliness and frustration of being seen as the know-all and be-all'. Some privileged migrants thus actively try to work against their privilege, with more or less success (Benson 2013; Hindman 2009; Kunz 2022). Migrants' discomfort with and rejection of categories can thus provide rich analytical insight into dynamics of power and privilege.

Despite this numerical, social and political significance and the now bourgeoning academic literatures on privileged migration – centrally including research on 'lifestyle migration' (Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Hayes 2018) and 'expatriates' (Fechter and Walsh 2010; Kunz 2016) – migration from the Global North to the South and insight generated from it remain marginal in migration studies inasmuch as they have yet to systematically inform (and reform) the field's conceptual vocabulary and theoretical toolkit. This is an urgent project also because North–South migration to (former) colonies has been shown to problematise established migration theories and highlight their persistent North-centric bias. For instance, privileged North–South migrants reaping benefits from their partial and highly selective 'integration', problematise the pervasive marginality bias of traditional integration and assimilation theory and its basic assumption that social mobility requires 'integration' (Benson 2013; Favell 2022; Hayes 2018; Kunz 2022). Research thus needs to attend to privileged North–South migration and to Southern host contexts more generally, and to the migration categories which circulate in these contexts.

## Research context and methodology

Nairobi is the capital of the Republic of Kenya and was founded as a city in 1899, under British imperial rule, for its strategic location on the Mombasa-Kampala Railway (Lonsdale 2010). Nairobi has always been a multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan 'city of migrants' (Campbell 2005, 5), drawing in European settlers, and British imperial subjects from the South Asian subcontinent and East Africa (Charton-Bigot and Rodriguez-Torres 2010; Rahbaran and Herz 2014). Following independence in 1963, many Europeans left but there was 'no mass exodus' (Nardocchio-Jones 2006, 493), and privileged migrants from Europe and elsewhere continued to arrive (Uusihakala 1999). Many 'Kenyan Asians', who trace a lineage to the South Asian subcontinent, also ended up staying post-independence, and others arrived, despite continuing concerns about their political status (Dickinson 2016). Rural-urban migration increased post-independence, with many new city residents settling in and expanding informal settlements (Rahbaran and Herz 2014). Since the 1980s, Nairobi has also hosted significant numbers of regional refugees, for instance, from Somalia (IOM 2018). While the city's colonial-era formal racialised segregation was dismantled, intertwined racialised and economic socio-spatial fault lines have remained stark.

Today, Nairobi remains East Africa's economic and political centre and continues to host a significant stratum of privileged migrants from all over the world, many of whom come to work for multinational corporations, international organisations such as the United Nations, and the many NGOs based in the city (Rahbaran and Herz 2014). This paper draws on data collected in 2016 during five months of ethnographic research on the category 'expatriate' and the privileged migrants inhabiting it. The research explored what the category 'expatriate' meant, to whom it was applied, what social relations and forms of belonging it constructed, and what inequalities and power hierarchies it was implicated in. Participant observation resulted in over 200 pages of typed fieldnotes, accompanied by 58 in-depth interviews with 18 Kenyan and 42 non-Kenyan interlocutors. Interviewees included 28 men and 32 women, who ranged in age from their 20s to their 80s and worked in various professions, were homemakers, or retired. I spoke to individuals labelled expatriate, either by themselves or others, who held citizenship of Australia, India, Malawi, Pakistan, Zimbabwe and the USA, with a majority holding citizenship of a European country, mostly the UK. Some had just arrived in Nairobi; others had lived there for over six decades. All non-citizen interviewees were socio-economically well-off in the Kenyan context, even if some reported struggling financially. The 18 Kenyan citizens I interviewed, some with dual citizenship, came from various socio-economic backgrounds and interacted with 'expats' either socially or professionally. Some had previously lived abroad themselves. Interview topics included daily 'expat' life in Nairobi and elsewhere, challenging and positive aspects of living abroad, and what defined an expatriate. While I rarely made the term mzungu the explicit focus of my research (with the exception of many taxi rides, where I soon switched to asking drivers not about 'expatriates' or 'expats', a term they often did not recognise, but about 'wazungu' or 'muzungus'), it came up repeatedly, evidencing its significant semantic overlap with the term expatriate.

Being a relatively young, white German PhD researcher normally based in the UK shaped my research. I enjoyed many of the privileges I studied, was called expatriate

and mzungu myself, and more or less seamlessly blended into the spaces I researched. Many so-called 'expats' were ready to speak to me about their lives or integrate me into their social circles. Others, however, rebuffed my efforts to speak to them because they rejected the label expatriate or because they questioned my motives, like one middle-aged North American man I met at an embassy party who accused me of being after a sensationalist account of drug- and sex-fuelled expat lives. My success in interviewing Kenyan citizens was similarly mediated by class, and I interviewed mostly middle-class Kenyans who I met at expat events, rather than, for example, the staff working at such events or at expatriate homes. An important limitation of this research is thus its analytical focus on how privileged migrants and urban, largely upper-middle-class Kenyans negotiate the category mzungu and its attention to mzungu solely in English rather than in Kiswahili social contexts and interactions. The paper cannot account for how Kenyans from other regional and class backgrounds, and ethnic, religious and cultural communities, relate to and use the term in discussions among themselves.

## Ambivalent relations: mzungu, migration and privilege

### *Just another rich, white mzungu? Newfound riches, denied belonging and difficult friendships*

Mzungu is a common term in Nairobi – or at least it can appear that way if one moves around the city as a white-identified person and gets called mzungu, often by children, but occasionally also by adults passing on the street. When a child called me mzungu in a shop, I exchanged a friendly smile with the father but when two adults did the same, I felt a twinge of annoyance and discomfort. Many migrant interlocutors similarly encountered the term upon their arrival in Nairobi and felt uncomfortable with the attention by strangers in public space which it implied, and for being singled out by their whiteness. Fechter (2005) observes similar dynamics in Indonesia, where her white interlocutors reported dismay at being publicly stared at or called 'bule'. She analyses such reactions as tied up with the loss of racialised majority-status and associated invisibility, a central pillar of racial privilege in respondents' home countries. Moreover, Fechter (2005, 98) notes that 'Expatriates' exasperation could be fuelled by the implicit conviction that Indonesians, as former colonial subjects, who are often regarded as politically, economically and socially inferior, have the least right to assume such power of representation over expatriates'. Just like Fechter's (2005), my interlocutors responded to this loss of racial hegemony by avoiding public space and frequenting up-scale locales, where they felt less conspicuous or their otherness passed unremarked (Kunz 2023).

Beyond objecting to the ways in which they encountered the term, many migrant interlocutors expressed irritation at the term's connotations of wealth. Being identified as a 'mzungu' could mean being charged higher prices for goods and services and even being asked for loans or being pursued romantically or sexually for one's perceived wealth or status. For example, Lewis, a white British interlocutor who had lived in Nairobi for over a decade, told me that Kenyans 'massively assume that because you're a mzungu you've got money, you're rich. Go shopping on Ngong Road, you'll get charged four times what a Kenyan would get charged for the same thing'.[4] Many felt

irritated by such experiences and the underlying assumption that they were wealthy simply because they were white. Indeed, Abedi, a Kenyan interlocutor, felt such assumptions even shaped some of his compatriots' behaviour towards him, and recounted an episode in which he was approached by a man,

> he was just joking, he thought he was funny, but he was seriously hoping I would give him something. He was like 'hey dude, I see you with these white people, why don't you share some of that money you get with us?' And I don't know whether they assume that if you are with white people, you are like a whore or something?

As other interlocutors recognised, being perceived as wealthy also implied certain privileges, especially in an economically very unequal society, such as being treated more respectfully and receiving more courteous service than many Kenyans. As Esther put it in our interview, 'at times you'll find a mzungu comes, [restaurant staff] drop everything, lose their minds, serve the mzungu and then remember you as an afterthought'. Moreover, some commented that white people could be perceived as 'smarter' or more skilled due to their race. For example, Max from the UK suggested that being white in Nairobi had 'got pros and cons. I think pros you're taken seriously but I think cons you do tend to get ripped off' and 'taken advantage off'. Berat, originally from Turkey, suggested that being read as white meant that for him 'business-wise, doors are more open' and Megan, from North America and married to a Kenyan, suggested that 'here, there is positive racism [toward white people]. I don't know if positive is really the right word, but they [Kenyans] sort of glorify you, they have certain perceptions, like you have a lot of money, you are smart … . This is like the opposite for a lot of immigrants'. Accordingly, one taxi driver responded to my question about mzungu by telling me that Kenyans had 'an inferiority complex. We think you are better, we need to realise that that's not true … ' (fieldnotes, 7.9.2016). Some interlocutors even suggested that the advantages of whiteness extended into the legal realm, with

> laws that only apply to mzungus or don't apply to mzungus. … Like traffic laws, a lot of the times, because I know a lot of people who get pulled over for speeding or drunk driving. They wave their UN badge, and they're just waved through … (Jess)

Suggestively, whiteness is here conflated with holding a UN diplomatic passport.

Some suggested that the mzungu's connotations of wealth and status were receding, at least in cosmopolitan Nairobi, partly due to the city hosting white migrants from a broader range of socio-economic backgrounds, as well as privileged migrants who were not white. Accordingly, Aadesh, an Indian interlocutor, found that,

> if you go out of Nairobi, you'll see that the way they deal with a Mzungu or with an Indian is very different. It's like you will have more privileges, they will deal with you in a more courteous way than they will deal with us. At the same time, it has its disadvantages because the expectations on tipping and giving them money is much higher from your side than mine.

Several Kenyan interlocutors, including Abedi and Esther, quoted above, suggested that the association of mzungu with wealth was 'a left-over' – presumably from colonial days – and was slowly changing, as

> we have more and more backpackers, like foreigners who come here, who stay at not necessarily expensive places, who'll eat street food, who'll make friends at the market. And that

> kind of changes the view … fifteen years ago in Nairobi, you wouldn't have walked down this street without people yelling out Mzungu (Abedi).

In contrast, Clara, a Kenyan entrepreneur, suggested that mzungu was not used less frequently but simply differently. She told me that nowadays, some Kenyans' choice of using 'mzungu' instead of 'expatriate' reflected whiteness' waning ability to secure automatic status. Given expatriate connoted middle upper-class status, 'I think most of the people don't want to use the term because, you know, … when an African goes somewhere they are an immigrant. … They get offended by it, so they just call you mzungu'.

As noted, some migrant interlocutors felt that being labelled mzungu reduced them to their race and thus meant they were not seen and treated as individuals. This was particularly painful when it was seen to foreclose belonging and stand in the way of romantic relationships and friendships with non-white Kenyans. Laura, a white British interlocutor, told me that 'if I stay here, I am always going to be an outsider. I am going to been seen as this rich person, seen as this white person, whatever'.

> SK: In which situations do you feel that?
> Laura: I have a bike and even when I am riding my bike around here, I will hear people shout mzungu at me and things like that. And again I am just losing my tolerance … in the past it wouldn't bother me but now I am just like, Come on you have seen white people before. Like why do you need to shout at me? It is not meant to be bad or anything, it is just some young man trying to be silly, you know. … But you are always kind of an outsider. …

Several interlocutors suggested that being seen as a socio-economically privileged 'mzungu' made it 'very difficult to make an uninterested friendship with a local … I feel like mzungus are seen like a bank on feet' (Adriano). This topic also came up in a conversation with fellow PhD students, all foreigners like myself, which shifted from discussing 'expats' to the term mzungu:

> What ensues is a heated discussion about privilege, and guilt, mainly among the other three. Alina gets upset if she is called mzungu. She says it refers to privileges that she doesn't have (e.g. being rich) and comes out of a history that isn't hers. We discuss the concept of privilege. Ed and Tom seem well versed in the arguments, they understand and are very aware of their privileges, as white men with UK and US citizenships. Alina is Romanian, says her mother was growing and selling vegetables not unlike many women in Kenya, she isn't privileged, it wasn't automatic for her to go to a Western European university, do a PhD on a scholarship, etc. She earned it. Plus, she doesn't want to assume British colonial history as hers, it isn't hers, she has nothing to do with European colonialism. … She says these structures also limit her, she tried making meaningful connections with lower-class black Kenyans, but it was always assumed she was rich, could help, she never knew if it was authentic or just instrumental. … Alina gets very emotional, defensive … [A little later, when we are alone] Alina says she often feels like conversations about privilege have the aim of making her feel guilty … (Fieldnotes, 5.5.2016)

Like Alina, all my interlocutors who lamented that the label mzungu stereotyped them as rich were in fact relatively well-off in the Kenyan context. They lived in comfortable flats or houses in desirable neighbourhoods and did, to my knowledge, not have to worry about meeting their basic needs and could indulge in at least occasional meals or drinks in upscale locales. Yet their often-emotional rejection of being positioned as 'rich' suggests that Kenya, their place of residence, was not their frame of reference for

assessing their relative class position. Instead, their socio-economic reference frame seems to have remained their home country, 'the West', or an imagined community of 'expatriates' in Kenya. This social positioning itself can be seen as an often-unconscious act of inadvertently normalising the economic inequality between the majority of Kenyans – and the imagined 'normal Kenyan' – and privileged foreigners or 'the West'. Such a negation of class privilege also forecloses further reflection and conversation about the socio-structural sources and (lacking) legitimacy of said privilege. Yet, Alina's sense that conversations about privilege meant to make her feel guilty also suggests a need, as Kathiravelu and Dorairajoo (2024, 2) put it, to 're-frame discussions in which privilege has been hijacked by an agenda that seeks to assign individual blame'.

Interestingly, it was always the socio-economically disadvantaged who were seen as potentially having instrumental – and hence supposedly dishonest – reasons for seeking social relationships across asymmetric class positions. Few interlocutors seemed to consider that the privileged, too, might seek out relations with economically or multiply disadvantaged people for reasons that had little to do with the individual character of poorer individuals. For example, one might seek a supposedly exotic or adventurous experience of dipping into the culture of the poor or construct the self as tolerant and enlightened through such relations, possibly to overcome feelings of guilt about privilege. My interlocutors never shared considerations that the financially worse-off individuals whom they sought to establish social relations with might heed such suspicions about their motives, too.

Alina drew on her lower-class origin and Romanian nationality to reject responsibility for British imperial history and its crimes. Indeed, Romania did not participate in Western European colonialism and was itself under imperial Habsburg and Ottoman influence until the late nineteenth century. The country continued to position itself among the disadvantaged, and during the 1970s actively forged ties with Third World countries, in an effort to oppose both US and Soviet imperialism and underdevelopment: 'Romania tried to convince Third World leaders that unity and cooperation among the 'unprivileged' were a shield against foreign interference and a guarantee of development' (Stanciu 2018, 1883). When rejecting grouping with other white people, specifically the British, Alina was surely cognisant of this history. Moreover, Romanians, like other Eastern Europeans, today frequently experience marginalisation, discrimination and exploitation in Western Europe, and at best a precarious inclusion in the imagined community of whiteness (see also Anderson 2026). Yet, erasing and denying individuality – such as Alina's – is exactly what racism does, with often painful emotional and physical consequences. All individuals have preciously little power over their racialisation, and being classed as white – however limiting it could be – ultimately afforded interlocutors privileges compared to many non-white migrants and Kenyan citizens in local, national and international context. Ultimately, interlocutors' frustration arguably further revealed white privilege, which allowed and indeed conditioned them to think about themselves first and foremost as individuals rather than as members of racialised groups in a thoroughly racialised world. Indeed, the very understanding of individuality as radical self-sufficiency rests on an anti-relational ontology shaped by epistemological whiteness. Such a construction of the discrete and individual human is traceable to the enlightenment, and as critics have pointed out, originally included only white, propertied men and was

(or possibly remains) theoretically and materially based on the relegation of the racialised Other as lesser or not human (Mbembe and Goldberg 2018; Page 2026).

### The contextual making and multivalent uses of racialised categories

Uses of mzungu revealed not only the co-constitution of 'race' and socio-economic status, but also the contextual making of racial regimes and the difficulty of equating mzungu with Euro-American conceptions of whiteness. Conversations with Kenyan acquaintances, interviewees and taxi drivers showed that, like expatriate, mzungu does not have a fixed referent. I got varying answers from Kenyan interlocutors as to whom mzungu referred to. Several maintained that the term referred to all 'white people'. For example, on a drive through Karen, a Kenyan acquaintance suggested that 'Kenyan Cowboys' (white Kenyans) were mzungus as much as white foreigners (fieldnotes, 26.5.2016). Accordingly, McIntosh (2016, 29) observes that white Kenyans rejected the label mzungu because they viewed it as a form of racial othering that challenged their national belonging – moreover, mzungu 'conflates expatriates with white citizens, something white Kenyans particularly resent' (McIntosh 2016, 231).

However, other interlocutors drew different distinctions. Samuel, a Kenyan yoga teacher, told me that in Swahili, mzungu means an English person, and because those 'were probably the first white people Kenyans saw, every white person became a mzungu'. But in proper Swahili, he noted, people from other countries would not be called mzungu: 'like you are from Germany, we'll call you mjerumani'. Similarly, a taxi driver specified that mzungu really only meant British or Americans, not white people from other nations; people used it for all whites, he said, because they just assumed everyone was British or American. Later, he specifically exempted white Kenyans from the term mzungu and said he could tell the difference between a white person born in Kenya and a foreigner because of how they dressed and understood Kiswahili. Also, he said, 'their skin isn't that white anymore, because here even when it's cold, it's not that cold. So their skin has become reddish, brown' – a notion I heard multiple times (fieldnotes 22.9.2016). It appeared that to some, whiteness changed tone when living in Kenya long-term.

But mzungu could also stretch the Euro-American boundaries of whiteness (Fogle, Duffy, and Hunter 2024; Lukate 2023). One taxi driver laughingly told me that 'kids in the slums can't differentiate, they will just call anyone mzungu, whether they are Indian, Chinese or whatever' – I forgot to check, but I assume he meant that they used mzungu for anyone not black (fieldnotes 17.05.2016). Someone else also foregrounded privileged foreignness over skin colour:

> "Well, there are two types of mzungus you see, the Indian mzungu and the mzungu mzungu, like you … ". "White people?" I ask. "Yes". "And who are Indian mzungus?". "The Indian mzungus are mzungus, because they behave like mzungus. Not the Indian Kenyans, the ones that come from India to work here … " (fieldnotes 9.9.2016).

That such readings of mzungu were more widespread also became evident in a conversation at an InterNations event. While Nairobi's 'expatriate community' was still a normatively white space, it today includes a diverse mix of people who, for example, originated from Pakistan and India, Zimbabwe and Malawi, Brazil or Mexico (Kunz 2023). Some

identified as white, others did not and some 'became' white in Nairobi. At one InterNations event, I met Jan, white, Western European, working for a multinational corporation, and Andrea, from Latin America and legally in Kenya as Jan's dependant. She spoke about the frustrations of not being able to work and pushing a stroller around Nairobi, a tricky task given a widespread lack of sidewalks, which was sometimes met with laughter by strangers. One of their Kenyan domestic staff suggested that people might laugh because they did not usually see a mzungu walking, let alone pushing a stroller. Andrea felt irritated and confused at being called mzungu, at being classified as white. 'Where she comes from', she said, 'race isn't an issue, everyone is mixed, … it's like you put everything in a blender' (fieldnotes, 25.5.2016) – a claim that arguably revealed her privileged position in the Latin American countries in which she lived, which retain stark racialised hierarchies. Another interlocutor's story similarly evidenced the mutability of mzungu. Khushi, an Indian-born US American interlocutor, recounted being called mzungu by Kenyan colleagues when speaking with an American accent, but muhindu – a Kiswahili term for Kenyan Asians – when speaking with an Indian accent. She also felt that Kenyan staff at work 'are more receptive to me when I start with my flat accent because maybe they feel like oh she is not that external American coming in and telling us stuff'. But when I asked her if she feels like she passes as white, she negates: 'Not white, but as a foreigner, as a Mzungu. I pass as a Mzungu'. These accounts evidence that race is always a contextual and fluid project and that racialised categories like 'mzungu' and 'white', though often conflated, never fully overlap. While mzungu stems from and encodes histories of white supremacy, it produces whiteness in other ways than the category 'white' does in majority-white contexts.

While many migrant interlocutors expressed irritation, discomfort or even hostility towards being called mzungu, some mobilised the term themselves for a variety of purposes. On my first day in the city, an acquaintance who worked for an international organisation showed me around 'expat Nairobi' and took me to Westgate Mall, which she jokingly called 'Mzungu Mecca'. Over a coffee in 'Artcaffee' – a chic café and bar chain with branches across Nairobi's upscale malls – she offered her commentary on expat life in Nairobi, focusing on 'the partying, drugs, men-children, big egos, etcetera' (fieldnotes 3.5.2016). The next day, the same acquaintance and I made our way to the Central Business District (CBD) because she wanted to buy some souvenirs, including T-shirts with the word 'mzungu' printed on them (fieldnotes, 4.5.2016).

Like my friend, some privileged white migrants I met used the term mzungu, usually in a slightly ironic way, to poke fun at white people in Nairobi, including themselves. Indeed, for some it seemed easier to talk about their own (newfound) whiteness and associated privileges with the emotional and cognitive distance that an unfamiliar language term provided.[5] Such an appropriation of the term mzungu, often with an ironic tinge, to refer to themselves and others they saw as like them, could also indicate an attempt at reclaiming the label and thus a lost power over naming and identity. As Fechter (2005, 101) suggests, 'using bule in such a casual, self-deprecating manner also represents a power move: through re-appropriating the term, expatriates limit the unwanted connotations that Indonesians' usage of the term might have, thus linguistically regaining a dominant position'. Other times, using the term mzungu seemed to imply an effort to demonstrate familiarity with the social context and thus perform a certain insider status and belonging. As I discuss elsewhere (Kunz 2022), while my

interlocutors did not face state-sponsored pressure to socio-culturally assimilate, many aspired to such integration and consequently rejected the label 'expat' with its potent connotation of an insufficiently integrated, privileged foreigner. In this context, using the term mzungu could signal that one knew the social context and was willing to accept the local label and, by extension, live with the local stereotypes one was assigned. As Stoler (2016) has shown, categories are flexible and can serve multiple purposes at the same time. Thus, privileged migrants' might have multiple co-existing motivations to mobilise the term mzungu, and these can stand in tension without necessarily cancelling each other out.

Finally, it seemed that in some cases, mobilising mzungu not only meant to signal familiarity and acceptance but also meant to communicate a recognition of one's own privileged position in Kenya and articulate a critique of inequality. Over the past decades, progressive feminist, anti-racist and related political movements have shown that the personal is political and initiated growing demands on privileged individuals to, at the least, recognise and 'check' their privilege. The political impact of such recognition, however, can vary. As Ahmed (2012) argues, saying the right thing can become a largely performative stand-in for actual individual or systemic change. Like rejections of 'expatriate', ironic mobilisations of mzungu, however critically inclined, could thus reveal 'the limits of progressive politics that focus solely on language and labelling, without addressing the material inequalities that underwrite the unequal usage of categories' (Kunz 2023, 256). Recognising such limitations does not mean to doubt the sincerity of the attempted social critique but exposes the limits of a liberal political project which, too often, individualises privilege and offers individualised solutions to structural inequality.

## Conclusion

This paper discusses how privileged migrants and Kenyan citizens in Nairobi understood and negotiated the category mzungu, and asks what their reactions to the term reveal about privilege in migration. Kenyan interlocutors offered varying interpretations of mzungu. While these interpretations centred on whiteness, wealth and foreignness, they nevertheless revealed the term's flexible boundaries and indeterminate meaning. Kenyan interlocutors also suggested that the category could be used with different intentions, but most emphasised its non-derogatory matter-of-factness. Migrant interlocutors, in turn, expressed frequent irritation and discomfort with being labelled mzungu, especially in public, finding that it reduced them to their race, ascribed them socio-economic privilege that many did not think they had, and in some cases foreclosed belonging and social relations with Kenyans. Yet, some migrants mobilised the term, frequently with an ironic distance, for diverse purposes, such as discussing their whiteness, reclaiming lost power over labelling or articulating a social critique.

Such hesitant to negative reactions to the category mzungu offer a useful analytical gateway to study privilege in migration. First, some migrants' struggles with their 'newfound' whiteness and socio-economic elevation evidence the mutability and contextual production of 'universal' racial regimes such as white supremacy, and their ongoing co-articulation with socio-economic inequality. Second, many migrants rejected ascriptions of 'being rich', although they were evidently well off in the Kenyan context,

suggesting that Kenya was not their frame of reference. Such flexible socio-geographic positioning might be a rhetorical strategy to emotionally distance oneself from or even normalise stark and still racialised socio-economic inequalities. Further, migrants' reactions to being labelled mzungu suggest that many interpreted the term's spotlighting of their intertwined racialised and classed privilege as an accusation of individual wrongdoing and a demand for guilt – rather than understanding their privilege as a socio-structural position they did not choose but had the power to leverage and challenge in different ways. Such individualising interpretations of privilege, too, may work as a defensive strategy, whether used consciously or not, to protect one's privilege by preventing discussions of its socio-structural underpinnings. Put simply, while the rhetorical individualisation of privilege may be emotionally hurtful, it hardly threatens its structural reproduction. This points to a broader prevalence of individualising discourses on power, privilege and inequality, which ultimately work to defend the status quo by distracting from required systemic change. Finally, migrants' interpretations of their privilege (or the lack thereof) appeared entangled with the social relations they sought and formed with other migrants and Kenyan citizens. Research on 'expatriates' has noted that many privileged migrants primarily socialise amongst themselves, which arguably shields them from confronting the stark inequalities that shape their migration and lives. Further research might explore why some migrants, in contrast, seemed to seek out social relations across asymmetric class positions with lower and middle-class Kenyans, and how they and their Kenyan counterparts interpreted the seemingly often frustrating outcomes of such efforts.

The article makes two further, interrelated arguments. First, it calls for the study of how migration categories are negotiated by those to whom they are applied. Specifically, this paper argues for a focus on migrants' disavowal and rejection of categories, given that such emotive and cognitive processes are revealing not only about the everyday lived experience of migration but also the broader socio-structures that migration is part of. Importantly, such a research agenda must include a focus on how less privileged migrants in the Global North and South[6] relate to categories applied to them. Not studying the views of less privileged migrants would leave unexamined a large part of the experience, impact and politics of migration categories, and moreover, do so in alignment with social hierarchies. After all, studying privilege should be a lens through which to analyse wider social inequalities, and should not result in prioritising the experiences and viewpoints of the privileged. Explicitly inquiring into migrants' relationship with categories is also necessary given that especially disadvantaged and exploited movers might not always be in a position to proactively reject categories, even if they disagree with them, including in research encounters.

Second, the paper calls for examining non-English and indeed, 'non-Western' categories of migration. As Pratt (2007, 7) suggests: 'If one studies only what the Europeans saw and said, one reproduces the monopoly on knowledge and interpretation that the imperial enterprise sought'. Mzungu is a potent socio-cultural migration category in Nairobi, East Africa and beyond, widely used in everyday life and migrant encounters. Moreover, the terms expatriate and mzungu are frequently used for the same people – a finding that holds for other non-Western language terms in formerly colonised contexts. Yet these terms differ in their history, connotations and in who uses them, with significant analytical consequences. Expatriate is used not only to refer to privileged

migrants, but knowing and engaging with the term itself is subject to socio-economic privilege. Mzungu, in turn, is used by Kiswahili speakers of all socio-economic backgrounds with different connotations and intentions. The terms we study thus impact whose perspectives we prioritise. Yet only the 'expatriate' is studied in migration research, and that only relatively recently. This absence of mzungu from the lexicon of migration studies reflects the field's Global North and state-centric bias. Words contain worlds, as Gluck and Tsing (2009) note, and by using Euro-American migration categories, we inadvertently reproduce Euro-American epistemological frames whose scholarly dominance is entangled with the regions' material power and status.

## Notes

1. See also the Indonesian bule (Fechter 2005), Murungu in Shona (Jaji 2019) Yovo in Ewe (Thomas 2021), the Akan Oburoni/Oborɔnyi (González, Mackenzie, and Álvarez 2008, 187; Lukate 2023) and Oyinbo in Yoruba (Falola and Genova 2005, 152).
2. Interlocutors often used the anglicised plural 'mzungus' instead of the grammatically correct 'wazungu' (compare Uusihakala 1999).
3. Similarly, Pierre (2012) found that for middle-class Ghanaians, the term Obruni was associated not just with whiteness but with money and power (see also Christian and Namaganda 2023).
4. This statement moreover positions whiteness as inherently non-Kenyan, a common rhetorical practice discussed further below.
5. I thank a friend for first suggesting this insight.
6. And indeed, 'Global East' (Anderson 2026).

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