

The Zimbabwe–South Africa migration corridor

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Abstract

This chapter highlights how the Zimbabwe–South Africa border is configured between the states and among people. It draws particular attention to the social processes in people's negotiation of the border and the processes of agency and subjectification associated with the movements. It presents the corridor as dating back to importing labour in South Africa during apartheid (1948–91), subsequent changes when Zimbabwe gained its independence in 1980, South Africa's democratisation in the mid-1990s, and Zimbabwe's almost two-decade economic crisis. The chapter argues that poor South Africans who have seen few economic benefits from their country's political freedom perceive black Zimbabwean migrants as a quintessential threat. They are educated, English speaking, and largely able to disappear within the South African body politic. The results are cultural performances of identity and social processes including xenophobia to construct boundaries between migrants and their hosts within Johannesburg, South Africa's primary city that is 500 km from any formal border.

Migration route development

The corridor between Zimbabwe and South Africa has developed over time, linking the two countries and their peoples. It dates back to the importation of labour in South Africa during apartheid (1948–91), with changes when Zimbabwe gained its independence in 1980, South Africa's democratisation in the mid-1990s, and Zimbabwe's ongoing, almost two-decade-long economic crisis. Driving and facilitating factors include disparities of wealth within and between countries; South Africa's industrial and service economies; and the spatial proximity and ethnic affinity between Matabeleland and South Africa. Although not a border spanning solidarity, cultural affinity of the Ndebele from Zimbabwe's Matabeleland region and the Zulu of South Africa influences some of this migration. A proportion of the Zimbabweans from Matabeleland are descendants of the Ndebele who moved from South Africa to Zimbabwe in the migrations of Mfecane in the

1800s. The cultural affinity of the migrants from Matabeleland and similar language historically facilitated the integration of some Zimbabwean foreigners in South Africa. Although few Zimbabweans travel to the 'Zulu heartland' in KwaZulu Natal Province, Zulu is the lingua franca of many mining areas and of the wealthy and migrant-rich Gauteng Province. Socio-political solidarity and cultural affinity between white Rhodesians and Apartheid White South Africans similarly facilitated the migration of white Rhodesians pre- and post-Zimbabwean independence, although this movement is rarely the subject of debates ([Mlambo 2010](#); [Simon 1988](#)).

Figure 45.1

During the apartheid era (approximately 1948–91), movements from Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) were closely regulated by bi-lateral labour agreements between the two countries ([Mlambo 2016](#)). Mining companies actively recruited Zimbabwean and other African workers from the region using a number of bodies including the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) and The Employment Bureau of Africa (TEBA) ([Crush 1999](#)). Such strategies allowed them to meet labour needs without empowering black South Africans. The reliance on foreign labour helped keep black South Africans in the homelands and reduced the likelihood of an organised mobilisation against employers or the state ([Prothero 1974](#)).

During the apartheid era, Zimbabweans were largely able to form solidarities with their South African co-workers. They also adopted ways to fit into South Africa's culture and society, such as adopting local language and style ([Sisulu, Moyo, and Tshuma 2007](#)). The mostly male migrants sometimes married into South African families or surreptitiously acquired South African or 'homeland' citizenship. While some stayed in South Africa or its apartheid era-homelands, most were unable to do so and were forced to return home to collect their salaries or renew contracts ([Mlambo 2016](#)). The migration was typically circular with South Africa as only a base for work to amass the resources to build a life back home in Zimbabwe ([Maphosa 2010](#)).

Changes in South African labour law and a decline in mining jobs have largely eroded these formal frameworks. In 1980, when Zimbabwe gained independence, there was a ban on the recruitment of mineworkers from Zimbabwe but individuals could seek work. The established migration route remained a part of the culture of Southern Zimbabwe. It became a rite of passage for young men from these provinces ([Maphosa 2010](#)). This was popularly called *ukutshaya idabulaphu*, an adaptation from the English phrase to double up and referring to the clandestine border crossing by mostly young men

from Matabeleland seeking employment opportunities in South Africa. Soon after independence, state-sponsored violence in the Matabeleland regions of Zimbabwe led young men to flee, intensifying the migration routes, which pre-dated Zimbabwean independence ([Alexander 1998](#); [Sisulu, Moyo, and Tshuma 2007](#)).

Since the late 1990s, there has been a steady increase of migration from Zimbabwe to South Africa owing to Zimbabwe's economic decline and political instability (Crush and Tevera 2010). This acceleration of migration has helped reshape the character of migration, Bolt (2010) speaks of a diversification of the origin of Zimbabwean workers on the farms who previously came from the areas near the border, now spread further afield. Yet movements also continue to flow through the channels carved in years past. Many Zimbabweans – estimates vary between 1 and 3 million ([Wilkinson 2017](#)) – travel to South Africa.

The formal and informal regulation of Zimbabwe–South Africa migration

Although South Africa continues to dedicate additional resources to physically controlling its borders, its efforts are stymied by widespread corruption, extended and remote distances, and intensive cross-border social networks. It is then, perhaps, not surprising that even with an escalation of police crackdowns and deportations, the South African public broadly imagines a porous borderland across which millions of Zimbabwean migrants more or less represents an invading army ([Mthembu-Salter et al. 2014](#)). South Africa's pragmatic effort to regularise Zimbabweans – including the 2010 Zimbabwean Dispensation Project (ZDP) – have helped tens of thousands to legalise their stay in the country. Although it is not a permanent guarantee of residence and has left many Zimbabweans in a state of limbo, it has nonetheless fostered further fears and resentment among South African citizens ([Amit 2015](#)). For poor South Africans who have seen few economic benefits from the country's political freedom, Zimbabweans represent the quintessential threat: educated, English speaking, and largely able to disappear within the South African body politic. Moreover, they can compete at multiple levels of the economy: the highly skilled challenge South Africans for executive and professional positions while the majority compete with an underemployed, working-class majority. Those who can be identified – those who have yet to perfect invisibility – become the focus of much unwanted attention. While the threats vary by class – the poor are the most vulnerable – patterns of social resentment and exclusion are widespread ([Hassim et al. 2008](#); [Landau 2012](#)).

Johannesburg

At the heart of South Africa's mining and industrial production, Johannesburg has long been at the centre of migrant journeys and imaginations. Johannesburg is popularly called eGoli, referring to the gold mines but also denoting the hopes that many people who come here have of striking gold in the 'New York of Africa' ([Grant and Thompson 2015](#)). With its immediate surroundings, it accounts for close to 10 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's gross domestic product. The highest concentration of Zimbabweans is in Johannesburg, a city whose prosperity does not translate to economic or physical security for migrants ([Palmary, Hamber, and Núñez 2015](#)).

Indeed, those in Johannesburg and elsewhere work, live, and/or stay for varied periods with varying legal status. A small percentage are professionals with permanent resident status and permanent jobs. Others have naturalised through marriage, other legal channels, or back channels. Many, if not most, live and work in South Africa with both precarious professions and papers. Historically Zimbabwean migrants were typically unmarried, unskilled young men but this has shifted to a more diverse profile that includes the highly skilled holders of university degrees; young and old; male and female; single and married (Crush and Tevera 2010). Those who migrate regardless of skill level typically maintain strong ties with Zimbabwe through remittances and regular visits ([Dzingirai, Mutopu, and Landau 2014](#)).

Perhaps more importantly, migrants no longer originate mostly from the Matabeleland regions of the country that are spatially and culturally proximate to South Africa. Zimbabweans from across the country have turned to migration for relief from the country's economic challenges ([Dzingirai, Mutopo, and Landau 2014](#)). Migrants from other parts of Zimbabwe do not share the cultural and linguistic similarities and find it more difficult to assimilate or invisibilise. Moreover, they often lack the social capital of long-established routes into the city. Needing help to survive, they have become highly visible in spaces of refuge including Johannesburg's Central Methodist Church ([Kuljian 2013](#))

This has led to a socialisation of geographic diversification of border making: a transfer of negotiations from the borderlands to places such as Johannesburg. Cultural performances of identity and social processes including xenophobia ([Landau 2012](#)), construct boundaries between migrants and their hosts with Johannesburg, South Africa's primary city that is 500 km from any formal border. Migrants' reciprocal attitudes are not far from the negative sentiments from their hosts. They may remain embedded in their

communities in Zimbabwe, but in South Africa they often remain at the edges of local communities and cultures ([Landau and Freemantle 2016, 2010](#)). Many see themselves as morally superior to locals. Some Zimbabweans conform to this cosmopolitanism and take pride in being stereotyped as more educated and hardworking than locals in response to their xenophobic reception.

Conclusion

Borders are both objective geographic sites and dynamic sites of socio-spatial differentiation ([Brambilla 2016](#)). This chapter highlights the ways the Zimbabwe–South Africa border is configured between the states and among people, the social processes in people’s negotiation of the border and the processes of agency and subjectification associated with the movements. The social bordering in South Africa’s cities combined with challenges in obtaining work permits leaves migrants at the margins in precarious working positions that do not always translate to making a good living. This reduces the likelihood of the transmission of significant remittances that can be used to successfully lead to development. Many, if not all Zimbabwean migrants, send remittances home although this does not necessarily translate to development. Remittances are usually to replace incomes lost due to Zimbabwe’s economic decline ([Dzingirai, Mutopo, and Landau 2014](#); [Maphosa 2007](#)). Furthermore, the wages are not significant enough for use for anything other than daily sustenance. However, while remittances may not translate to development in Zimbabwe, they contribute positively to the welfare of receiving individuals and families and at times the immediate community. The modalities of migration between Zimbabwe and South Africa are presented in this chapter framed by the socio-political context of the two countries. Apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa has the migration of white Rhodesians which in post-apartheid South Africa remains largely invisible. The movement of black Zimbabweans initially not recognised by apartheid South Africa in the post-2000 political moment is visible, pathologised, and abhorred. The link between the two countries however endures as the migration continues to maintain connections through remittances and other exchanges cultural and otherwise.

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