Seeking Solidarity: Zimbabwean Undocumented Migrants in Cape Town, 2007*

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The political and economic crisis that Zimbabwe has been experiencing since 2000 has resulted in the large-scale migration of Zimbabweans to South Africa. Based upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Zimbabwe and South Africa in 2006 and 2007, this article argues that Zimbabwean migrants expected that the South African state would acknowledge the incidences of violation in Zimbabwe that prompted their movement to South Africa. Specifically, migrants asserted that conditions of structural violence in Zimbabwe were serious enough to warrant asylum. However, upon arrival migrants found that the South African state considered these reasons to be less valid than those of physical political violence. Within South African discourses around the Zimbabwean crisis, there are thus forms of suffering that are considered more valid than others. The article further argues that migrants were also mistaken in their expectations that South Africans themselves would be welcoming. The article examines how the positioning of Zimbabwean migrants within various legal and social categories limited the ways they could speak and act, encouraging them to speak and act through difference rather than similarity. The article thus contextualises undocumented migrants’ experiences of South Africa in the build up to the xenophobic violence of May 2008.

It is no longer possible to overlook the fact that human tragedies on a massive scale are part of the ‘normal’ order of things.¹

The recent migration of Zimbabwean nationals to other countries, in particular South Africa and Britain, has been so extensive that it has been described as a diaspora.² The magnitude has appeared so great that reports in the South African media have carried headlines such as ‘Zim’s Woes Swell Flood of Illegals’³ and ‘Zimbabwe Exodus Overwhelming SA’.⁴ This article is based upon ethnographic fieldwork with Zimbabwean undocumented migrants in Cape Town in 2007, a year prior to the deeply flawed 2008 Zimbabwean election, and the outbreak of xenophobic violence that occurred across South Africa in May 2008.⁵ The article explores the multiple displacements that caused migrants to travel to Cape Town and,

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through the use of migration histories, the political and economic factors affecting migrants’
decisions to move over great distances, and to move multiple times. Drawing on informants’
experiences in Zimbabwe and South Africa, the article further considers migrants’
expectations about South Africa and contrasts those with the realities they encountered on
arrival. Asylum seekers leaving Zimbabwe with ideas of South Africans as ‘struggle
brothers’ and with local ideas of how to treat strangers, quickly learned that they were
perceived as outsiders and that their notions of regionalism and commonality were
disregarded in favour of notions of sovereignty and difference. An element of this process
hinges upon the ways in which migrants were categorised by South Africans: labels and
categories such as *makwerekwere* (a derogatory South African term for foreigners), illegal
immigrant, asylum seeker, refugee or simply ‘Zimbabwean’ all shaped how Zimbabweans
were able, or not able, to speak. Rather than speaking and acting through similarity, these
categories ensured that Zimbabweans emphasised difference and, through this, experienced
an alienation of the self. Physical displacement from Zimbabwe to South Africa was thus
followed by a displacement of voice for those Zimbabweans who resided in South Africa
without documentation. The xenophobic events of 2008 showed the relevance of foreigners’
lack of voice.

This article represents early reflections on fieldwork I carried out from December 2006
to January 2008 in both Harare and Cape Town, although most of the data used here are
drawn from South African work conducted in 2007. In Cape Town, I worked with PASSOP
(People Against Suffering, Suppression, Oppression and Poverty), a grassroots activist
organisation campaigning for undocumented migrants’ rights. PASSOP was started in late
2006 by Braam Hanekom, a white South African national who grew up in Zimbabwe but
now lives in Cape Town. By 2007, Hanekom was held in high esteem by Zimbabwean
undocumented migrants across Cape Town. Using immigrants’ extensive informal
networks, PASSOP had collected the details of approximately a thousand undocumented
migrants from various townships across Cape Town by 2007, and had a base of around one
hundred undocumented migrants with whom it frequently worked. At the time of fieldwork,
the organisation received no funding from external sources, and relied upon money from
varied fundraisers, and Hanekom’s own personal funds. Through press releases and public
protests, PASSOP aimed to raise awareness of undocumented migrants’ difficulties in
South Africa, particularly with regard to access to Home Affairs, and to publicise the
conditions within Zimbabwe that had resulted in movement. On a more immediately
pragmatic level, it also provided essential items such as food and blankets to undocumented
migrants in need.

While I was working with PASSOP, I met several individuals who made it possible for me
to gain access to three communities6 of Zimbabweans living in various townships in Cape
Town: Harare, in Khayelitsha; Masiphumelele/Fish Hoek Site 5; and Philippi. Although I
largely entered the field through activism, I did not remain solely in that role once I came to
know informants and was granted access to migrants’ social networks. Through the initial
activists I had come to know, I met many other undocumented migrants who were not
involved in activism. Activism was thus only one element of research in South Africa, and did
not constitute the focus of my research. In addition to research in Cape Town, I spent some
time in Worcester, a town two hours outside Cape Town, where many Zimbabweans had
found seasonal work on surrounding farms. I thus took part in the daily life of the
organisation, spent time ‘hanging out’ in the community, stood on street corners and traffic

6 The development of close-knit and inter-reliant groups of Zimbabweans in predominantly South African
townships allows for the use of the word community. While community dynamics are important to the lived
experience of migration, an in-depth discussion of this falls beyond the scope of this article.
lights where informants were selling goods, and queued and slept outside the Home Affairs refugee centre. As well as having informal conversations in these settings, I conducted formal, open-ended interviews and focus groups with 50 male and female migrants, and collected their migration histories. As there seemed to be a slightly greater proportion of men than women in the Western Cape, this was reflected in interview ratios. The ages of informants ranged from 19 to 59, although most were in their mid-twenties. Informants came from both rural and urban areas in Zimbabwe, and from Shona- and Ndebele-speaking areas, although the proportion of first language Shona speakers was higher. All the informants also spoke English. Informants had been in South Africa from one month to five years, and in Cape Town from one month to three years. The majority were undocumented migrants, although some had managed to secure asylum seeker papers and two had been granted refugee status. Informants emphasised that the political situation in Zimbabwe was such that words could have very real effects on the lived experience of violence when they expressed fears of reprisal upon their return to Zimbabwe if they were identified as having criticised the ZANU(PF) government. It was thus more imperative than usual that informants’ identities be protected. For this reason, I use pseudonyms throughout this article and do not provide details of informants’ lives that might lead to identification.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: ‘Life in Zimbabwe is Murder These Days’7 but ‘Makwerekwere Must Go Home’8

Since 2000, until they left for South Africa, the Zimbabweans with whom I worked in Cape Town in 2007 had lived through a period of Zimbabwe’s history that saw a decline in democratic freedoms and the rule of law under the ZANU(PF) government. This corresponded with an increase in political violence, as well as a cataclysmic shrinking of the Zimbabwean economy.9 As other articles in this journal explore these issues in depth, my aim is to outline the dual forces of political and structural violence at work in Zimbabwe since 2000. I do this to contextualise migrants’ decisions to move to South Africa, and to begin to unpack the conceptual frameworks that underlie understandings of what constitutes violence and violation. The cases of political violence and torture from the late 1990s onward10 are well documented11 and caused Hill to comment that, ‘Since 1999 Zimbabwe has been in an undeclared state of civil war’.12 Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch13 note violations of the right to freedom of movement, and the right to freedom of assembly. In 2005, Operation Murambatsvina (‘clean out the filth’)

7 Slogan on a billboard in Musina, South Africa, encouraging Zimbabweans to return home to vote in the 2008 elections.
8 I heard this being chanted outside a police station sheltering foreign migrants during xenophobic violence in Khayelitsha in 2008.
10 The events of Gukurahundi in Matabeleland in the 1980s make it obvious that political violence was not ‘new’ to postcolonial Zimbabwe – see The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), Breaking the Silence, (Harare, CCJP, 1997).
destroyed thousands of homes in high-density urban areas, under the pretext that homes were illegal dwellings and that better housing would be provided (see Musoni’s article in this volume). The benefits have yet to materialise while locals and international rights organisations widely understand Murambatsvina to have been a way of punishing urbanites for voting against ZANU(PF). 14

Physical violence and human rights violations such as these have influenced the movement of many Zimbabwean migrants and asylum seekers. In terms of human rights law, such acts fall under the heading of violations against first-generation rights – those mainly concerned with political rights, and the basic security of persons. Second-generation rights refer to those concerned with the socio-economic. Messer 15 argues that violations against first generation rights are generally accorded greater credence than violations against second generation rights. A migration history that includes political violence is thus much more likely to result in a successful asylum application than one that includes only violations against second-generation rights.

Along with direct, physical violence, the economic situation also constitutes a form of violence against the entire Zimbabwean population. For these reasons, I use the term violence in line with Farmer’s notion of structural violence 16 which includes the social and economic forces constraining individuals and contributing to insidious forms of everyday suffering. My perspective is also informed by Kleinman’s ‘violences of everyday life’ 17 which reflect the acute, yet less spectacular, violence such as patriarchy or poverty that can inform daily living. The collapse of the Zimbabwean economy led to estimated unemployment rates of 70 per cent by 2004 18 and, at the end of 2008, unemployment was estimated at 94 per cent. 19 Economic decline was accompanied by declining access to basic services. The Institute for War and Peace Reporting claimed in 2007 that Matabeleland South, a province of Zimbabwe, had only one doctor for four million people. 20 That same year, Tapuwa, a female undocumented migrant with whom I worked, decided to settle in South Africa after years of circular migration as she was pregnant and feared she would be unable to access healthcare during the birth of her child. She also worried about the chances of her child surviving. By 2006, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported that child (under five years old) mortality had risen to 129 per 1,000, as compared with 67 per 1,000 for South Africa. The same report estimated the life expectancy of Zimbabwean women at 34 years, and an average life expectancy for women and men at 36.9 years: 21 this in a country where a recent headline read ‘Loved Ones Dumped in the Night as Burial Now a Luxury’. 22

As I explore below, the migrants with whom I worked viewed structural violence of this kind as a violation of their basic rights. The experiences of Zimbabwean undocumented migrants in Cape Town are complicated, however, by the realities of structural violence in

18 Solidarity Peace Trust, No War in Zimbabwe: An Account of the Exodus of a Nation’s People (November 2004).
20 F. Cheda, Health System Near Total Collapse (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 3 January 2007).
South Africa. Immigrants often move into communities that are already marginalised and situated within the ‘racialised economic geographies’ which characterised the apartheid city, and which characterise the post-apartheid city today. In these high density areas situated in the geographic periphery of the city, poverty is a reality for most inhabitants: the 2004 Cape Town African Urban Poor (CTAUP) study found that 70 per cent of 624 randomly selected households in Khayelitsha and Greater Nyanga were ‘excluded from access to sufficient food during the previous year’. The undocumented migrants with whom I worked also lived in areas of poverty and inadequate housing and infrastructure. The areas that receive undocumented migrants, therefore, are already under considerable strain. Although migrants constitute a small portion of the population, the scarcity of resources feeds discourses that posit foreigners as competitors. A context such as this is one in which xenophobia thrives, and is thus the impetus for the ease with which the categorisation of foreigners is mobilised.

Statistics on the extent of migration of Zimbabweans to South Africa are fairly hard to come by as there is extensive illegal entry into the country. A newspaper report, however, stated that 2,750 Zimbabweans arrived in Cape Town in 2007, and that a Home Affairs parliamentary committee had been told that there were around 111,000 Zimbabwean refugees in South Africa in 2006. However, Democratic Alliance spokesperson Sandy Kalyan’s comment that ‘The department does not have the systems in place to accurately monitor numbers’ indicates the inadequacy of this sort of data. As informants with whom I worked had been queuing outside Home Affairs in Cape Town for up to six months before getting an appointment, it is highly unlikely that Home Affairs statistics are reliable, and estimates from other sources ranged as high as three million Zimbabweans in the country in 2007.

In May 2008, 62 people were killed, and 35,000 forced to leave their homes, during outbreaks of xenophobic violence in South Africa. Two months earlier, in March 2008, many Zimbabwean migrants had been hopeful that the Zimbabwean Presidential and Parliamentary election would bring a change that would enable them to move back to Zimbabwe. However, it was only in June, while many Zimbabweans were still resident in camps set up in South Africa in the aftermath of xenophobic violence, that results were released that saw Robert Mugabe remain President. This followed a run-off election between Mugabe and Tsvangirai, the leader of the main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), after initial results did not provide a clear majority for either leader. Tsvangirai subsequently dropped out of this run-off, citing violence against his supporters. ZANU(PF) thus retained its exclusive grip on power until 2009, when a power sharing deal (which is locally considered largely illusionary, with ZANU(PF) still retaining the ‘real’ power) was brokered between ZANU(PF) and the MDC. At the time of fieldwork in 2007, however, political power was still firmly in ZANU(PF) hands. The migrants with whom I worked in South Africa were thus placed at the interstices of political and structural pressures, both within Zimbabwe and South Africa. All had left Zimbabwe in search of a better and safer life, only to find that life in South Africa also held the threat of structural and physical violence.

24 Ibid., p. 111.
Speaking of Violation

A key outcome of the political and economic violence in Zimbabwe (and, to a lesser degree, South Africa) is the development of what Kleinman terms ‘a moral economy of fear’, something that influences people’s ability to speak of their experiences. Ross has argued that ‘one characteristic outcome of violence and terror is an unmaking of everyday language’. In this context, the formulation of narratives becomes difficult, but was held as extremely important by informants, as the telling of stories was expected to provide a means for spaces of solidarity to open up in interactions with South Africans (see below). This was compounded by the fact that within Zimbabwe there was little to no public acknowledgement of experiences of violation and little space for dialogue, or for the formation of narratives around these experiences except within very personal worlds. Even within the realm of intimate relationships, speech around violation may be difficult: as Hastrup notes, ‘violation is not simply a transgression of somebody’s physical boundaries; at a deeper level it is a violation of selfhood, and hence a destruction of the position from which one may speak in the first person’. MacDonald has also argued that communities ‘may disempower a victim a second time’ in that to re-enter social worlds people must remain silent about their experiences or re-formulate them to fit acceptable modes of speech.

Acts of speaking or of silence took on a new relevance within Zimbabwe in 2007 in ways that tied into migrants’ expectations of what South African solidarity might mean. For example, one of my visits to Harare coincided with the execution of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. I was startled when a pensioner in a supermarket aisle, whom I had never met before, whispered to me as she bent over and placed two potatoes into a bag to be weighed, ‘Did you hear they killed Saddam? Live on television?’ and then moved off without waiting for a reply. When later that day a garage attendant mentioned the same incident, and then a man selling newspapers at a stop street, I realised that the execution of Saddam Hussein had become a public code through which it was possible to speak about Mugabe and political oppression. Words that could not be overtly spoken to strangers had found an outlet: in my interpretation, this was a way of telling fellow citizens that leaders can fall. Ways of speaking were thus constrained, and informants emphasised that upon arriving in South Africa, the issue of public acknowledgment of the situation in Zimbabwe became central. Informants highlighted that they wished to speak freely and without constraint in order that they might be heard and their experiences validated. Drawing on informants’ conceptualisations, in this article I am taking ‘the public’ to be a space in which it is possible to speak to strangers, be they South African neighbours, journalists or Home Affairs officials. Informants’ expectations of South Africa were formed around the notion of solidarity as a space for public engagement: undocumented migrants went to South Africa expecting the possibility of commonality through speech, of solidarity through social interaction with strangers. Ideas of regionality played into this conceptualisation, however, in that South Africans were presumed to be both stranger and, through elements of (largely imaginary) shared history, like-kin. These issues are explored and elaborated below using ethnographic examples.

When I began my fieldwork, many of the South Africans I spoke to assumed that Zimbabweans who had crossed the border would, at the very least, be ‘safer’ than those still at home. Migrants had expected a space for less constrained speech than was possible in Zimbabwe’s political climate. In light of these expectations, were migrants able to speak of their experiences in Zimbabwe within the relative safety of South Africa in 2007 – a safety that the events of May 2008 have shown to be largely illusionary? From the popular South Africa perspective, as disseminated in the media and voiced in numerous conversations I had with South Africans from all walks of life in 2006 and 2007, the answer should be simple. In these discourses, violation (and thus a lack of safety) was only viewed as physical intimidation and/or violence, with an emphasis on the centrality of an event of violation, and it was presumed that these violent incidences occurred in the past, in Zimbabwe. By this logic, in South Africa, Zimbabweans should have been safer and thus able to find a platform for less constrained speech. Ironically, the events of May 2008 provided many examples of incidences of physical violation within South Africa – but even prior to this in 2007 the reality of the positioning of Zimbabweans within both moral and pragmatic economies in South Africa meant that the answer was in actuality more complex, and involved Zimbabwean migrants negotiating and re-negotiating constantly shifting fields of discourse within unequal relationships and within varying forms of categorisation. The above question then shifts: instead, we must question what Zimbabweans were expected to speak of by South Africans, and under what conditions it was possible to do so. In order to explore this, and to explore the difference between expectations of solidarity and the realities of structured difference, it is necessary first to examine the reasons Zimbabweans came to South Africa, and their experiences in getting to Cape Town. It is to this that I now turn.

Leaving Zimbabwe, and Expectations of South Africa

In the case of the migration of Zimbabweans to South Africa, the usual dichotomy of forced versus voluntary can be seen to be problematic, as can distinctions between migration and mobility. Mangalam, for example, defines migration as ‘a relatively permanent’ condition. In the case of the Zimbabweans with whom I worked, the ‘relative permanence’ of their move was entirely reliant upon conditions in Zimbabwe: none of the 50 people I interviewed in depth had plans to stay in South Africa permanently. As most had nuclear family members still in Zimbabwe, their intention to return to Zimbabwe seems genuine. As Joseph, a 29-year-old chiShona man from Mabvuku in Harare, put it, ‘[we are] here to hide ourselves for a short while’. The ‘hiding’ in this phrase refers to fear of the South African police. Joseph has tried to get an appointment at the Home Affairs refugee centre on numerous occasions, but failed; and, being one of the few undocumented migrants with whom I worked who was employed, could not afford to keep on trying, as this involved sleeping outside Home Affairs for a minimum of a week in order to join the queue each morning, slowly inching towards an actual appointment. The permanence of his stay was thus contingent upon political, economic and social factors in Zimbabwe, and in South Africa. This example also highlights the second issue of forced versus voluntary migration. There was nothing in Joseph’s migration history that would allow him to be granted asylum. Were he ever to get an appointment, the

32 In that this dichotomy is the one utilised by the South African state.
34 Interview with Joseph (Pseudonym), Cape Town, August 2007.
Department of Home Affairs would consider his migration to be economic and thus voluntary. To Joseph, however, this was anything but a voluntary move. His wife and children were still in Harare, and if he could afford to keep his family alive and fed by staying with them, he would have. As it was, the money he sent home was barely enough to keep the family going, and did not cover school fees for his two children. Categories that posit distinct boundaries between migrational phenomena, therefore, are not coterminal with the experience of movement, where choices are both strategic but also constrained.

During the course of my research it became clear that, in many cases, the distinction between forced and voluntary migration was consistent with experiences of internal displacement (which can be categorised as forced) followed by movement across national borders (which tends, within South Africa, to be categorised as voluntary). Two ZANU(PF) initiated campaigns serve as good examples of this: the displacement of farmworkers from commercial farms following farm invasions, and Operation Murambatsvina35 in 2005. During the latter, the police, the army and youth militias demolished residences and stalls within urban areas leaving an estimated 700,000 to 1.5 million people homeless.36 In these two cases, the initial forced displacement within Zimbabwe often led to an eventual move to South Africa that would not have been considered otherwise. Of the 50 migrants I worked with, 23 had been displaced by Murambatsvina and indicated in interviews that this had been a major factor in the decision to move across the border. The following case study, which is similar to many migration histories, serves to illustrate this:

Sekai, a 59-year-old Shona woman who originated from a rural area in the Midlands of Zimbabwe, had been living with her husband in a high-density suburb of Harare for 20 years at the time of Murambatsvina. She and her husband were rudely awoken by the police early in the morning and, along with neighbours, forced at gunpoint to demolish their own brick houses. At the time of Murambatsvina, her husband was working as a carpenter, while she sold chickens and eggs that she raised in her backyard. The chickens were confiscated by the police ‘because they said it was people like me who were destroying our economy. I just sold those chickens and eggs because otherwise we would be starving’.37 Her husband hurt his hand demolishing their home and was subsequently unable to work. They decided to go back to their rural place of origin, where they still had family, ‘because there was nothing for us in Harare. We had lost everything. The police wanted to send us to Caledonia38 but we went to our own place’. Upon arrival, they found acute food shortages, and little welcome from family members ‘as they thought since we had been evicted we must be MDC. We were a danger to them’. They had little access to food, and upon the arrival of food aid to the area food was denied to them as ‘they said we were MDC’. They stayed in the rural areas for six months, relying on food sent from their daughter in South Africa. During this time Sekai’s husband died, and, as it was his extended family they were staying with, Sekai was forced to move again. She returned to Harare but could not make a living there. Her daughter sent her money and she used this to come to South Africa. ‘I would never

35 Described by the government as ‘Operation Restore Order’, a more accurate translation from Shona is ‘Operation Drive out the Filth’. P. Ncube, R. Bate and R. Tren, State in Fear: Zimbabwe’s Tragedy is Africa’s Shame (Bulawayo, Africa Fighting Malaria, 2005), p. 4.


37 Interview with Sekai (pseudonym), Zimbabwean asylum seeker in Worcester, June 2007. All quotes that follow in this paragraph come from this source.

38 Caledonia Farm, just outside Harare, was described by police as ‘a transit camp before they are routed to appropriate places’. Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (ZHRNF), ‘Order Out of Chaos, or Chaos Out Of Order? A Preliminary Report on Operation “Murambatsvina”’ (Harare, ZHRNF, 2005), p. 12. One aim of Murambatsvina was to relocate urban voters to rural areas which were ZANU(PF) strongholds, thus dispersing the largely MDC supportive urban population.
Sekai was thus internally displaced twice as a direct result of Operation Murambatsvina, and moved across the border as she felt she now had no other choice. Her story was chosen as it echoes the stories of many other informants. When being interviewed by Home Affairs in Cape Town, however, the emphasis of the questions, she said, was directed to a period of time just before she left Zimbabwe. Murambatsvina had taken place 9 months prior to this, and so she did not inform Home Affairs of this as, ‘they didn’t ask. They only wanted to know about just before I came. They then said I’m just an economic migrant’. Her interactions with the South African state thus confounded her expectations of public acknowledgement. Power dynamics obviously come into play in this instance: Sekai did not feel she was in a position to offer the elements of her story that she thought were important, but only to answer the questions asked. Sekai was issued with asylum seeker papers, but was very afraid of her next visit to Home Affairs to determine whether or not she could be given refugee status. As Merry has noted, one dimension of anthropological research in areas of violence and justice is ‘the slippage between the role of activist and scholar and the impossibility of separating them’. She advised Sekai to emphasise her experiences of Murambatsvina when speaking to Home Affairs, thus playing into the field of legal rights discourse that determines that experiences be told in very particular ways to particular audiences, which tend to focus on ‘the event’ of violation.

**Speaking to the State**

Experiences of forced removal within Zimbabwe, be it through Murambatsvina, farm invasions or any other means, form an ambiguous territory where legal status within South Africa rests upon the ways in which stories are told. It is a territory, however, where there is a possibility of being granted the right to stay in South Africa until it is safe to return to Zimbabwe, as the story contains an event or series of events that can be held by South African state officials to put the person’s life at risk were they to return. For many migrants, however, the South African state will not validate experiences that Zimbabweans take to constitute endangering survival. For example, in instances where migration occurred due to sustained unemployment, which in the context of Zimbabwe is a short step away from potential starvation, movement to South Africa was taken to be voluntary, and continued residence in Zimbabwe was not seen as hazardous enough to legitimate asylum. It is in the context of these stories, an example of which is elaborated below, that the rupture between expectations of South African solidarity through acknowledgment of violation and the reality upon arrival becomes most obvious.

Members of PASSOP took it as an article of faith, as shown through conversation, and through their insistence that it was written into pamphlets, documents and press releases, that ‘life in Zimbabwe is a human rights violation’. For these migrants, many of whom had little hope of being granted asylum, the lived experience of suffering and poverty constituted a form of violation that they felt the South African state should recognise as legitimate grounds for asylum. The majority of these migrants had, at some point in their time in Zimbabwe, experienced physical violence at the hands of the army, the police, the youth militia or ZANU(PF) supporters, but all emphasised that the primary motivation behind movement across the border was the economic situation in Zimbabwe. With an unemployment rate of

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over 80 per cent, scarce access to food (and at times water), healthcare and education, migrants considered conditions within Zimbabwe to be unliveable, and emphasised that the majority of those still at home ‘are only able to stay alive because we send them food and money’.41 These categories of health, food and water are of course categories that are recognised by international human rights law as second generation rights,42 and in theory violations of this kind are seen to be human rights abuses. South Africa was seen by migrants as a place of safety where this would be recognised: as Farai said to me, ‘It’s not crazy here like it is at home these days. I thought for sure they would see that we cannot stay there, that things are not right there. I didn’t even see it as a question.’ The realities that migrants find in South Africa, however, led to their questioning previously held ideals of human rights. ‘How’, asked a 30-year-old female migrant, ‘do we believe in this idea of rights when we see it doesn’t exist for us in South Africa, it doesn’t exist for us at home’?43

Within academic and legal categories, there has historically existed a discursive binary between forced migration/displacement, and voluntary migration/mobility. An examination of the etymology of ‘mobility’ and ‘displacement’ is a useful means of situating these binaries. The Oxford English Dictionary Online defines ‘mobility’ as, ‘The ability to move or to be moved; capacity for movement or change of place; movableness, portability’ and further, ‘Ease or freedom of movement; capacity for rapid or comfortable locomotion or travel’. These all imply movement across spaces with comparative freedom. Displacement, on the other hand, is defined as ‘Removal of a thing from its place; putting out of place; shifting, dislocation’, and can also be traced to theories of physics, such as when a stone thrown into a jug displaces some of the water. Here, the movement is caused by something external, and is beyond the control of the ‘thing’ being removed. While the etymology of both these words shows an initial usage with regard to objects, the academic discourses of migration and movement have applied them to the movement of people, with the result that mobility, drawing on its roots, which emphasised an object’s internal capacity, has come to imply agency, while displacement implies coercion of some kind. Whilst early academic ideas around migration, such as those shown by Mangalam above, tended to rely upon these fairly distinctive binaries and categories,44 recent works have become much more nuanced and recognise the slippage between categories in peoples’ lived experiences of migration.45 However, whilst the vast academic literature on migration and mobility has moved beyond such constrictive binaries, the categories of forced versus voluntary are still very relevant in applying for asylum within South Africa. The state, in other words, works within bureaucratic pressures that push towards particular categorisations.

The discursive categories of internal displacement versus refugeehood are also relevant to the lived experiences of Zimbabweans. The main distinction between the two lies not in the sort of violence from which one flees, but in whether this leads to movement across a national border. Adeyemi Oyeneni argues that:

Most international and non-governmental organisations ... limit their understanding, policy focus and relief assistance mainly to the refugees while the internally displaced persons ... are left at the mercy of the very government that caused the displacement in the first place.46

41 Interview with Farai (pseudonym), Zimbabwean undocumented migrant, Cape Town, April 2007.
42 Messer, ‘Anthropology and Human Rights’; G. Robertson, Crimes against Humanity.
43 Interview with Mary (pseudonym), Zimbabwean undocumented migrant, Cape Town, July 2007.
44 Mangalam, cited in Hansen and Oliver-Smith, Involuntary Migration and Resettlement, p. 2.
Further, he argues that the distinction is one of name only, and does not reflect a necessary difference in experience. Many of the individuals with whom I worked had been displaced a number of times prior to movement across the border – yet, as we shall see below, even physical movement across a border was not sufficient to allow legal movement into the category of refugee.

How, then, does the South African state situate Zimbabwean migrants within the discursive binaries of mobility versus displacement, and internal displacement versus being a refugee? The cases above show that in initial experiences of internal displacement, which can be categorised as forced, were often followed by movement across national borders, which tends, within South Africa, to be categorised as voluntary in that movement occurred a significantly long time after an event considered to be life-threatening. Thus, although migrants move from being internally displaced to being, in their eyes, displaced across an international border, and thus eligible to fit into the category of refugee, the South African government does not necessarily recognise this to be the case, as it categorises many Zimbabweans as mobile economic migrants.

**Speaking to South Africans**

Along with their hopes that the South African state would express its solidarity with Zimbabwean refugees and would recognise the suffering they were experiencing, Zimbabweans also expected a warm welcome from South African citizens. Zimbabweans carried local ideas of hospitality to South Africa. When they found that their views were not reciprocated by South Africans, Zimbabweans then reframed their relationship to South Africans through ideas of brotherhood and an imagined history of a shared struggle. Migrants emphasised that they expected to find themselves welcomed in South Africa ‘as these are also our people, we were all together fighting so that black people do not have to live in this way’.47 Sometimes solidarity was framed as moral debt, such as ‘When things were bad here (in South Africa under apartheid) we schooled their children, we trained their militia, the apartheid blew up our buildings. But now they don’t look at us’.48 No one with whom I spoke had personal experience of any of these events. Rather, Zimbabweans drew on an imagined regional solidarity that, ironically, emphasises a series of particular events as the basis for legitimacy. Before coming to South Africa, therefore, migrants expected to find a refuge, a place of asylum and solidarity: a place in which it was possible to speak to strangers and thus to become familiar. The following section explores migrants’ popular perceptions of experiences in South Africa: a situation not of solidarity but of difference; not of telling common stories, but of remaining silent or, at best, of telling stories in very particular ways from, and through, a position of marginality. As I show, this dominant narrative tells only one kind of truth about life in South Africa while discarding alternative stories and narratives.

**Categorising Difference**

Simba arrived in Cape Town in March 2007. Prior to arriving in South Africa he had worked as an electrician in Beitbridge, but was offered an opportunity to illegally smuggle cigarettes across the border for which he would be paid R100. At the non-official exchange rate, this was more than a month’s salary within Zimbabwe. He took the chance and crossed in the night with

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47 Interview with Moses (pseudonym), Zimbabwean undocumented migrant, Cape Town, April 2007.
48 Interview with Katherine (pseudonym), Zimbabwean undocumented migrant, Cape Town, August 2007.
ten other smugglers, ‘because I wasn’t earning enough at my job to even feed myself, let alone send money to my wife’.49 His wife was still in another district of Zimbabwe: he had left her there to go and work in Beitbridge because the youth militia in his area, into which he had been indoctrinated in 2006, were angry with him after he refused to beat up a woman suspected of being an MDC supporter. He left his wife with his mother, and fled to Beitbridge where his uncle was living. Initially he considered smuggling cigarettes to be an opportunity to get some money to his family, ‘but once I had crossed the border and seen how hard it [the crossing] was I thought I would stay and send money from South Africa’. After handing over the cigarettes, he and a friend left the others and set out into the bush with R100 each. They were caught by police that day and, after a week in a holding cell, repatriated. As soon as Simba was back in Beitbridge, he left again and, using kinship networks and borrowed money, made it to Johannesburg. Although one would think being deported by police in South Africa would have shown Simba the difference between notions of South African sympathy to his plight and the reality, it was only when he was in Johannesburg that Simba fully realised this. His explanation shows the strength of ideas of racial solidarity:

The farmer who caught me was white. He gave me to policemen who were white. I thought, that’s why they are so cruel. We know about whites in South Africa, they’re not like whites at home. I thought if I can get to a place with South Africans who have also suffered under a bad ruler, they will understand. Even if their government says I can’t stay, people there will let me be. But in Jo’burg . . . in Jo’burg it was bad. I was with Zimbabweans and the first thing they said was ‘don’t speak in Shona in the street, if you speak Ndebele you can do that, it’s like Xhosa. Don’t walk this way, walk that way . . . they think this is how Zimbabweans walk. They can’t know who you are, if they do, you’re gone.’ I couldn’t quite believe it, but now of course we all know. It doesn’t matter your history, here you are just makwerekwere.50 If you anger your neighbour they will just call the police. And it’s easy to anger someone when they think you are an animal.

Simba stayed with relatives in Johannesburg for a week, and then borrowed money to travel to Cape Town. He chose Cape Town because he heard that Home Affairs there was easier to access, and the police less stringent as there were fewer Zimbabweans who had travelled so far. On arriving in Cape Town, he first slept outside the Home Affairs refugee centre for three weeks, before giving up hope of being granted an appointment. He now lives, illegally, in a township outside Cape Town where he shares a 3 m² shack with four other Zimbabwean men. Some days he finds work on construction sites. When he is not doing construction work, he tries to sell wire craft goods. Only once has he succeeded in accumulating enough money to send something home to his family.

Simba, like other migrants, utilised social networks in finding places to live in Cape Town. Informants drew upon the recommendations of family members, friends or people met in the queue outside Home Affairs for advice on which areas of Cape Town they should move to. The increased numbers of Zimbabweans migrating to Cape Town has thus resulted in the growth of a number of Zimbabwean communities in areas such as Harare (a suburb in Khayelitsha), Masiphumelele, and certain sectors of Nyanga and Phillippi. National identity became relevant in the mobilisation of Zimbabwean communities, which act as a safeguard against exploitation by, for example, informing new immigrants what sort of rent they should be paying. It also acts as an economic safeguard, providing the basis for pooling resources: sharing food with neighbours or, in times of crisis, mobilising the entire community to help transport a corpse back to Zimbabwe.

49 Interview with Simba (pseudonym), Zimbabwean undocumented migrant. Cape Town, July 2007. All quotes that follow in this paragraph come from this source.

50 *Makwerekwere* is a derogatory term used to refer to foreigners. The term literally indicates unintelligible language and has deeply discriminatory overtones.
The experiences of Zimbabwean undocumented migrants in Cape Town are, of course, complicated by the realities of structural violence in South Africa, as explored above, and the realities of xenophobia. Informants who had passed through Johannesburg emphasised that the situation was better in Cape Town, but nonetheless they were aware of their tenuous position, and the ways in which being *makwerekwere* could very suddenly become relevant. Moses, a bartender in a prestigious suburb of Cape Town and who lived with his wife in Khayelitsha, expressed this thus:

I speak to no one in the street when I walk home from the taxi rank, and my wife hardly leaves the room during the day. We only go to church, because there we are all Christians, not foreigners or South Africans. But even those people — on Sunday you can be worshipping God together, and on Monday when you go to the shop, they insult your wife and call you *makwerekwere*.51

The insecurity of being positioned as an outsider resulted in a great deal of fear, even prior to the xenophobic attacks of 2008. Moses, for example, would not bring his children to Cape Town as he was frightened of what might happen to them because they were foreign. ‘It is better’, he said, ‘for them to starve at home with their grandmother than it would be for them to come here. They would be killed when they walk home from school. They would probably be killed at school’. Being identified as *makwerekwere* curtails people’s movements: streets are unsafe places, places to avoid walking in alone. This in turn points to the relevance of national identity, as Zimbabweans try to walk together in groups. Being *makwerekwere* thus results in an embodiment of fear, ‘Here, you are like a bird’, said Moses, ‘your heart flutters all the time’.

Let us return, to Simba’s case study. In terms of positioning, Simba’s story reflects the stories of many other migrants. From the moment of his arrival in South Africa, Simba was categorised by the state and citizens as different: first, as a border jumper, and second, as *makwerekwere*. From neither of these positions was it possible for Simba to frame his story as he saw it: as a tale of continual violation, both economic and political. Experiences within South Africa led Simba to activism, and he is now a member of PASSOP. Simba argued hotly (as did all the activists with whom I worked) that the conditions in which he lived in Zimbabwe constituted a violation of his basic human rights: ‘no food, no water, no money, no way of making a change without risking your life’. It is worth noting, however, that the activists with whom I worked came to activism through dissatisfaction in South Africa: their motivations, therefore, were concerned with speaking to the South African, not Zimbabwean, state. Simba further argued that violations were continual: the conditions in which he lived in South Africa were not better than those he left behind. The following excerpt from my field notes, however, which shows an exchange between Simba and a journalist at a protest outside Home Affairs, illustrates how others might view his story:

A journalist standing in front of me asked of Simba, an asylum seeker, ‘Why are you in South Africa? Are things so bad in Zimbabwe?’

When Simba nodded, she went on to ask, ‘Were you beaten by the police?’

‘Sometimes’, he replied, ‘but I am here because my family were hungry’.

‘Sometimes?’ she queried, ‘When? What happened to you?’

‘Yes, I have been beaten’, he said. ‘So have many others. But every day we are suffering’.

‘Yes, you have suffered’, the journalist replied. She thanked him and walked away.

When the newspaper came out the next day, the story contained quotes from undocumented migrants which focused on events of physical violation in Zimbabwe. Simba’s emphasis on continued suffering was not included. Tsing, in her 2005 ethnography *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, writes of ‘the interactions I call “friction”: the awkward,

51 Interview with Moses (pseudonym), Zimbabwean undocumented migrant in Cape Town, April 2007.
unequal, unstable and creative qualities of interconnection across difference’,\textsuperscript{52} the ‘zones of awkward engagement where words mean something different across a divide, even where people agree to speak’.\textsuperscript{53} The journalist’s emphasis on ‘suffered’, and Simba’s assertion that ‘we are suffering’ illustrates a common disjuncture between the ideas of violation as held by asylum seekers, and those held within the South Africa media. The daily experience of hunger, of poverty, of lack of access to water or to electricity: in other words, the constant indignities and quiet brutalities caused by structural violence in Zimbabwe constitute a form of suffering that does not ‘sell’. This is unsurprising: it is a story that is not specific to being Zimbabwean, one that could be told by a multitude of South Africans. Stories of this sort, those that do not fit into a mode of spectacular violence, have been told so many times in South Africa that they have come to be white noise, which is not heard. In the space of the public, therefore, migrants may be able to formulate narratives in ways that they feel adequately fit reality, but this reality is not heard. Spaces for public acknowledgement (and thus spaces for solidarity) only open around tales of spectacular, not structural, violence. Ironically, the xenophobic events of 2008 provided such a spectacle – and thus a space for a specific (and horrifying) public story about being foreign in South Africa. In 2007, however, positions of marginality and unequal power relations meant that narratives had to be formulated in particular ways. Zimbabwean undocumented migrants adroitly traversed these fields of discourse: at the same protest, for example, stories came to be re-formulated to fit into the expected narrative. John, who that morning had spoken to me about the need to emphasise the continuity of suffering, listened to the above conversation and then went on to describe to the journalist his experiences at the hands of Zimbabwean police. His story was published the next day.

Silencing at the level of daily interactions in townships, and in interactions with media, therefore, works to delegitimise particular types of suffering. Even where a broader definition of violation is used, such as within organisations that have been formed for the precise purpose of providing asylum seekers with a platform from which to speak, there are still elements of experience that are disregarded. Working with PASSOP created opportunities for migrants to speak that were not publicly possible within Zimbabwe: ‘What about human rights?’ was emblazoned across a banner at a protest outside Home Affairs, while another read, ‘There is no legitimate government in Zimbabwe’. Physical displacement from Zimbabwe can therefore work to allow for voice in ways that was not possible prior to movement. This voice is constrained, however, by the very category of ‘activist’. The strategies of activism are such that certain elements of life experience are emphasised and others ignored: stories are being chosen, after all, in organised ways with direct aims in mind. Thus, although organisations such as PASSOP form part of the opportunity structure available within Cape Town, activists’ motivations are such that certain elements of their personal biographies come to be emphasised whilst others are disregarded. This occurs particularly with regard to asylum seekers current situation of dire poverty in South Africa. Conditions of structural and economic violation in Zimbabwe formed an important part of the agenda, as did lack of access to Home Affairs, and conditions for those living outside Home Affairs. The conditions in which asylum seekers lived in communities in townships in South Africa, however, were downplayed, as this might highlight South Africa’s inability, in terms of infrastructure, to cope with its own citizens, let alone an influx of migrants: not a side of the story that needs to be highlighted when the aim is to change South African policy on asylum seeking.


\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. xi.
Some elements of ongoing structural violations, therefore – elements that, to asylum seekers, are integral to any ‘real’ telling of their story – are not told through activism. In addition, the continual fear under which non-documented migrants live is left out of most activist narratives. In one migrant’s words, ‘This is not freedom. I am hungry here just like Zimbabwe. I am suffering here just like Zimbabwe. I am afraid of the police here just like Zimbabwe’. Experiences with police and figures of authority at Home Affairs within South Africa do little to alleviate fear. Although South Africa may have one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, in reality there is an enormous gap between policy and practice: police are overworked and underpaid, and not necessarily trained in the rights of illegal immigrants. Reports released by SAMP on conditions in Johannesburg and at Lindela show gross mistreatment of Zimbabwean detainees. In addition, immigrants’ experiences of Home Affairs leaves them, at best, deeply disillusioned and frustrated. Xenophobia within communities also adds to a continuation of fear and, ironically, to physical violations of the sort that migrants use to prove they were persecuted in Zimbabwe. Political, economic and social experiences within South Africa, then, do little to persuade immigrants that their rights are no longer being violated now that they have left Zimbabwe, and expectations of solidarity come to be re-framed in terms of experiences of difference and an othering of the self.

No narrative can ever tell the ‘whole’ story. This narrative leaves out important elements of life as lived – elements that again do not fit into an agenda aiming to shift South African perspectives on Zimbabwe, although including structural violations would create a story that informants felt contained a greater truth. In this case, this occurs through the story that I, as anthropologist, am expected to tell; a strategic story that emphasises hardship. But what of the success stories? What of migrants who have made it? Indeed, even where mobility has not been successful in improving standards of living, what of life’s pleasures: parties in communities, the birth of a child, conversations with friends? These elements are missing from migrants’ narratives, even though I know that they exist from the time I have spent in communities. The need for public acknowledgement of suffering ensures that it is imperative that undocumented migrants communicate the degree to which fear is central to their lives. But in telling stories of fear, they exclude stories of pleasure. Undocumented migrants, therefore, are able to speak from within South Africa, but have reason to speak in specific ways, few of which allow for commonality with South Africans. Informants perceived solidarity as a space of understanding and a commonality through voice. Experiences of difference, however, work to place restrictions on the ways in which people can listen to each other, and thus the ways in which solidarity can be achieved.

Conclusion

Hastrup notes that ‘with such invisible facts as suffering in particular, there is no way of understanding people except through one’s own experience, and power of imagination’. The danger of categorisation is that it limits the power of imagination, in that categories work to disallow speaking from positions other than that of the category, and all its attendant stereotypes, and thus disallow varied ways of listening and understanding subjective experiences. If solidarity is framed as the experience of having stories understood by

54 Interview with Netsai, Zimbabwean undocumented migrant, Cape Town, April 2008.
strangers, then categorisation works against this. In the context of South Africa and Zimbabwe, an emphasis on physical suffering and ‘the moment’ of violation as a more legitimate type of narrative about the Zimbabwean situation is dangerous in a number of ways. First, it negates the lived experience of daily suffering, and invalidates experiences of ongoing violation. Second, an emphasis on physical violation removes responsibility from ZANU-PF for all but direct incidences of violence and torture. Third, it removes responsibility from the South African government for experiences of violation in South Africa. Zimbabweans who speak from within these categories are not passive, but are active agents within discourses of rights and violation. However, it is imperative to consider the ways in which power dynamics affect agency and choice within this. Ross, writing on the TRC process in South Africa, commented ‘that restoration of dignity is not simply a function of restored voice, but of a voice in control – that is, a voice with a signature’.57 The positioning of Zimbabwean undocumented migrants within moral economies of fear within Zimbabwe and South Africa in 2007 provided only a very tenuous control over what narratives were accepted as legitimate, and thus little space for ‘a voice in control’. The xenophobic violence of 2008 showed that what happens to bodies, too, need not be under individuals’ control. Sadly, spectacular suffering such as this causes us to take notice, while less spectacular but more continual suffering remains invisible.

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