Abject spaces, transnational calculations: Zimbabweans in Britain navigating work, class and the law

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Opportunities for migrants in Britain have become increasingly differentiated by hardened legal barriers, restricted access to asylum and filtering by selected skills. This article explores the effects of this differentiation on diaspora formation, social mobility and class identities. It takes the case of one of the UK’s largest new African migrant groups – black Zimbabweans – who mostly come from middle class/elite backgrounds, but who have ended up in unskilled and informal work, as well as securing professional posts in Britain. The article asks whether, and in what sense it might be useful to talk of the polarised opportunities created by legal status in terms of emerging class differences and challenges to class identities. It dwells on the subjective experience of those in irregular legal circumstances, whose loss of status in Britain has been particularly acute, drawing on theoretical debates on abjection and dehumanised ‘bare life’ that speak directly to the popular discourses and language in which those doing menial work and lacking papers spoke about their experiences and place in Britain. As some have, however, maintained their class position both at home and in intergenerational terms, the article highlights the transnational calculations that continue to render even illegal unskilled work in the UK attractive, and underlines the importance of discussing abjection in terms of the relations of power and processes that create legal spaces of exclusion rather than as a putative underclass. Notwithstanding such calculations, the article highlights the importance of legal status and inequality within migrant groups in shaping the dynamics of new diaspora communities in Britain.

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Introduction

Zimbabweans who have come to the UK over the last decade live and work in sharply polarised circumstances. On the one hand, there are those who have secured professional work or set up their own businesses, as well as those who have secured refugee status. Many have experienced deskilling, racism and loss of status, feel like exiles and are alienated from Britain, but they have a degree of basic stability derived from their rights to residence/work and their incomes, and are in a position to plan careers, mortgages, investments and family life; some are flourishing in the UK. At the other extreme, there are those trapped in unskilled jobs with insecure legal status, many of whom struggle to meet their own basic needs and family obligations and live in fear of deportation. The difficulties faced by this latter group have become more acute over time, as access to asylum has become restrictive to the point of criminalisation, avenues of regularisation have been shut down, and the scale of immigration from Eastern Europe has increased competition for unskilled work.
My aim in this article is to investigate how such differential experiences of work and the law are contributing to the shaping of diasporic identities and cleavages. In theoretical terms, I want to ask whether it might be insightful to speak of emerging inequalities among recent migrants in the UK in terms of class differences and challenges to class identities, and examine their impact on the dynamics of diaspora formation. I refer to class here as being more than a relationship to the way wealth is produced, distributed and consumed, but also about cultural identity (both ascribed and assumed), and see class identities as intersecting with other axes of difference, and as historically produced (Devine et al. 2005; Skeggs 2004). The recent revival of academic interest in class in the UK has been stimulated by the evident persistence and reshaping of inequalities, despite political rhetoric claiming that internal differences (IPPR 2007; on employers stereotyping, see McDowell et al. 2007). One of the difficulties in looking at class in diasporic contexts, however, is the lack of a single frame of reference – a problem that is compounded by an analytic literature that tends to treat class as spatially contained (Kelly 2007; Devine et al. 2005). Yet recent Zimbabwean migrants in the UK are positioned (and locate themselves) in multiple ways, not only in relation to their workplaces, their neighbourhoods, British social discourses more generally or family and compatriots in Britain, but also in relation to family networks in Zimbabwe, and to the social judgements of home.

To think through the implications of, and reactions to such multiple positioning and varied opportunities, I shall briefly review theoretical debates on diaspora and class, linking them to discussion of the stratifying effects of the law in western receiving countries (Morris 2003; Kofman 2002), and the emergence of what some commentators have referred to as a radically excluded ‘abject class’ of migrants lacking basic rights (Nyers 2003, 1070). I then turn to the Zimbabwean context, to explore debates over the dynamics of class and the transnational calculations that spurred migration beyond southern Africa as a middle-class/elite strategy for meeting socio-economic aspirations and escaping violence. This discussion is used to frame the analysis of my own interview material relating to the ways in which Zimbabweans in Britain reflected on their experiences of work, shifts in status and sense of class identity.

I draw on interviews with more than 80 black Zimbabweans conducted in 2004–5 as part of a broader project on the new Zimbabwean diaspora. The interviewees were selected to reflect experiences of both skilled and unskilled work in Britain, regular and irregular legal status; the main groups interviewed were careworkers (32), nurses and teachers (37), other unskilled (14) and employers (labour agencies) (5). The interviews were facilitated by members of the Zimbabwe Association (a community-based asylum-seekers support group, of which the author is trustee), and by other Zimbabweans who provided introductions to relatives.
and friends. At the time of the interviews, approximately half of those in care/unskilled work had irregular work status, not because they had entered illegally, but because they were in the asylum system, their claims had failed or they had overstayed visitors and students visas.

**Diaspora, class and the law**

In a recent review, Ralph Grillo criticises cultural approaches to diaspora and transnationalism for their tendency to suppress class: studies of hybridity, cosmopolitanism and liminality, he argues, often ‘decontextualise and conflate different personal and institutional subject positionings, and in so doing . . . overlook the extent to which transmigrants remain bound to nation and class’ (2007, 199). There are, however, some bodies of literature that explicitly discuss class and diaspora in a non-reductionist manner, sensitive to ‘the interplay of culture, class and power’ (Rouse 1992, cited in Grillo 2007, 206). One example can be found in debates over varieties of cosmopolitanism, which have explored ‘working class’ and ‘vernacular’ counterparts to elite forms (Werbner 1999; Diouf 2000). More directly relevant to the discussion here are studies of class in relation to transnational work and family that have emphasised intersections between class, gender, race and nationality, and have sometimes also explored the effects of state migration policy (Parenas 2005; Watson-Roberts and Pratt 2005; Batnitzky et al. 2008; McDowell et al. 2007; Kelly 2007; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007; Beserra 2003; Martes et al. 2002). Increasing acknowledgement of the variety of transnational projects and range of socio-economic niches (not only the prestigious or low status extremes) has produced illuminating studies of how ‘middling’ class identities have been reproduced or challenged through transnational mobility (Conradson and Latham 2005; Batnitzky et al. 2008). Middle class/elite migrants from the global South may experience particular anxieties over class due to the difficulties in making their status travel to the West due to a combination of racial hierarchies, insertion into low status jobs or legal barriers.

Indeed, studies of African migrants in Britain have often addressed class primarily through concerns over loss of status. Vasta and Kandilige (2007), for example, elaborate Ghanaian migrants’ discourses of London as ‘the leveller’, while Akeamppong argues that movement from Ghana to London erases all class distinctions African immigrants brought from their homelands. The educated and the semi-literate, the highborn and the lowborn rub shoulders as they vie for the same menial jobs. (Akyeampong 2000, 186)

But such discussion needs to follow through the on-going logic of the transnational calculations that brought these migrants to low status work in Britain in a trajectory through space and time to consider their class/status effects back home and for the next generation. Mazzucato’s study of Ghanaian migrants in the Netherlands’ ‘double engagement’ begins to achieve a discussion of her subjects’ transnationalism that is sensitive to such spatial and temporal effects. She also differentiates usefully between those with and without legal status, and highlights the role of Dutch migration policy (Mazzucato 2008). Studies based only on the experiences of those doing unskilled work will also be misleading if they draw conclusions for entire national or diasporic communities without considering connections and tensions between those in menial work and the professionals and business people who have prospered in Britain, or the role of political, religious or mutual aid associations. Mohan’s study of Ghanaian home town associations formed by relatively stable and well-to-do migrants is suggestive of the importance of emerging class divisions, as he emphasises the associations’ elite social base and role as a means of ‘expressing and cementing status’ (Mohan 2006, 867, 873).

Where diasporas have been produced through conflict at home, however, it is possible that class cleavages are less important, at least in some associations and networks. Studies of refugee organisations have cast them as characteristically fractious and internally distrustful, not along class lines, but due to political divides imported from home (Griffiths 2000; on distrust among Latin American migrants, see McIlwaine 2007). Perhaps for this reason there has been little or no discussion of class in relation, for example, to the all-subsuming state nationalism of Eritrean diaspora politics (and recent resistance to it), or Somali diaspora mobilisation, which has been cast as clientalistic and fractious primarily along clan lines (Hepner 2007; Griffiths 2000). Conflict is important in shaping the dynamics of diaspora and class in other ways too, due to the impact of war, violence and trauma on socio-economic mobility, and the erosion of asylum rights (elaborated further below), which has channelled many de facto refugees into criminalised
irregular legal categories that eclipse any prospect of integration and constrain accumulation.

In seeking to illuminate the effects of legal stratification on diaspora formation and social mobility in relation to black Zimbabweans, this article will dwell in particular on the experiences of those who have ended up in irregular circumstances, or ‘abject spaces’ in the terminology I use. This is because they are probably the majority of Zimbabweans in the UK, and have faced the most extreme challenges to their middle class/elite identities. But I also return at the end to explore the multiple cross-cutting connections and cleavages with Zimbabweans living in more stable circumstances.

Class, status and the Zimbabwean exodus

The decades following independence in Zimbabwe were characterised first by unprecedented social mobility for the black majority, as legal barriers underpinning white privilege were removed, the state invested in education and the rapidly expanding public service was Africanised. But opportunities contracted again over the 1990s under the influence of structural adjustment policies and subsequent economic crisis, which provided the context for new processes of diasporisation. As in other African contexts, popular discourses on social mobility were strongly shaped by colonial legacies and ideas about race, tended to revolve around status rather than class per se, often focusing on embodied performance and modes of consumption, on ideas of modernity and tradition mapped onto notions of the urban and rural (Ferguson 1999 2006). For many upwardly mobile black Zimbabweans, the ‘epitome of success’ was to move into a house in the former ‘white’ suburbs of Zimbabwe’s cities (Mhiba 2004). Zimbabwean popular discourse provided commentary on African social mobility through caricatures of high status forms of consumption and bodily comportment associated with whites, labelling the new elites of Harare’s northern suburbs ‘nose brigades’ (referring to English spoken through the nose, like Europeans or Americans) and ‘masalads’ (‘the salad eaters’). More positively, within many state bureaucracies, the new black professional classes upheld traditions of public service, cultivated notions of respectability and placed a high value on education as a tool of social advancement – middle class ideals that had been nurtured in a late colonial context through mission schools and were perpetuated thereafter (see also Werbner 2004; Fumanti 2007).

Although some commentators have gone as far as to categorically deny the relevance of class in the contemporary African context, insisting that ‘vertical linkages of patronage between elites and their clients’ and ‘competition between clientalist networks eliminate[s] the possibility of class solidarity and stratification’ (Chabal and Daloz 1999), Zimbabwean society is more complex than conveyed through a binary distinction between elites (both black and white) and ordinary people. Rather, there are also significant black middle classes who are particularly important to the discussion here. Indeed, the effects of structural adjustment have been discussed in explicitly class terms, as introducing unprecedented inequalities, hardening socio-economic divisions and eclipsing opportunities for the middle classes, especially public servants, as well as urban workers (Gibbon 1995; Bond and Manyanya 2003; Sumich 2007).

Initially, the exodus that accelerated in this context was racially and ethnically inflected: there was an early trajectory of white flight after independence, while ethnic tensions between Shona and Ndebele exacerbated through state massacres in the 1980s produced profound disaffection among Ndebele communities (Alexander et al. 2000). Over the course of the 1990s, however, the movement became more all-encompassing, with women prominent in the outflow thanks to the feminisation of opportunities in care and nursing. The latter part of the 1990s were marked by strikes and protests over deteriorating standards of living and elite corruption, and eventually a new urban-based political opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) emerged from the union and civic movements (Raftopoulos and Sachikonye 2001; Raftopoulos 2003; Raftopoulos and Compagnon 2003; Dashwood 2000; Gibbon 1995). From 2000, hyper-inflation combined with political violence targeting MDC members and supporters, union and NGO activists and other social categories such as teachers, contributed to the pressures to leave.

As the exodus gathered pace and households of all classes were forced to look beyond Zimbabwe’s borders to make ends meet, there was a notable class dimension to movement beyond the Southern African region, as would-be emigrants were filtered by their capacity to command the economic capital necessary for the flight. This filtering became more
pronounced over time, particularly from 2000 as flights ceased to be available in local currency, and as visa requirements imposed by Britain in 2002 further inflated costs. The visa also criminalised asylum (as requesting asylum was not legitimate grounds for a visa), forcing many into informal routes involving false Malawian and South African passports (Ranger 2005). This is not to say that those who made it to Britain were undifferentiated: some people left having already accumulated substantial wealth in property, others felt foreign remittances were the only route to acquiring property; some had businesses and professions, others left to achieve them through study or to support children or siblings’ education. Some had direct experience of violence, and particularly after 2000, the overwhelming majority felt they had been forced to leave. The fact that some fled for directly political reasons does not make their economic circumstances and social ambitions irrelevant: the British state’s distinction between political refugees and economic migrants confers rights and a relationship to the law, but it lacks intellectual validity in other respects, as it does not reflect individual calculations or interlinked politico-economic structural circumstances.

The growing diaspora reinforced transnational dimensions to Zimbabwean middle class aspirations and the visibility of remittances invested in property fed fantasies of easy riches. ‘I imagined I would live like the Queen, and would return rich after a few months’, one young woman (a secretary from Harare) recalled thinking when she left for Britain in 1998 to save for a house and her children’s education; another woman (wife of a businessman seeking asylum) who left a few years later felt ‘we thought going to UK we would live that American life’ (on West African ideas of ‘the West’, see Nyamnjoh and Page 2002). Discourses back home in Zimbabwe on ‘madiaspora’ [the diasporans] were in many ways as ambiguous as earlier discourse on the ‘nosebrigades’ and ‘mashalads’; the visible signs of remittances, such as investments in property, gave the remitters themselves status, yet made them objects of envy as well as aspiration, and the funds were received both with gratitude and resentment against those supposedly living a comfortable life and making good while those at home were left to suffer. The filtering by class of those who made it beyond the southern African region is clearly apparent in recent studies of remittances: Bracking and Sachikonye (2007, 12) show that households in Harare’s elite and middle class suburbs are more dependent on remittances than less affluent high density neighbourhoods, and that they account for the greater proportion of remittances from the UK.

Transmission, class and the law in Britain

Despite this evident filtering of migrants from Zimbabwe by the economic capital they could command, and despite growing acknowledgement in the academic literature on migration that, in general, it is not the poorest social classes who move between continents (Van Hear 2006; de Haas 2005), analyses of migrants’ social mobility in the British context often ignore status and class identity back home. Instead studies tend to position migrants in a single British frame of reference related to their employment, reading off class status from work and explaining social mobility in terms of cultural values and the density of ethnic social networks (Rumbaut and Portes 2001; Archer and Francis 2006; for a useful critique, see Shah 2007). Yet this notion of ‘ethnicity as social capital’ assumes that ‘ethnic identity is paramount, that all members of the ethnic community are equally committed to that culture or to specific notions of ethnic authenticity’, and downplays the role of structural constraints, gender and generational hierarchies and connections beyond the ethnic community (Shah 2007, 29–30). Moreover, the valuation of education among successful minority groups, which is understood to insulate them from the destructive cultural values of an ‘underclass’ is cast as an ‘ethnic’ value, rather than as class-infused and historically produced, often in colonial contexts.

The structure of opportunity within Britain for Zimbabweans (and other non EU migrants) has changed radically since the late 1990s. While skilled routes have opened up and allow a path to full citizenship (reinforced in the shift to a points-based system), other ‘strata’ of entry/work are reserved for EU citizens (such as unskilled work), asylum has been radically restricted, and those finding themselves in irregular categories are barred from all prospects of inclusion, are stripped of the privileges of citizenship and are liable to detention and enforced removal (Kofman 2002; Morris 2003; May et al. 2007; Bloch and Schuster 2005; Flynn 2005). Zimbabweans had been encouraged
to come to Britain partly because of the labour market opportunities, and there was a degree of flexibility for those arriving speculatively that allowed them to regularise their stay (for example, by enrolling for nursing bursaries, or taking out student visas to legitimate work). Removing this flexibility and enhancing state control has been a major goal of recent policymaking. The number of Zimbabweans (and others) in irregular circumstances has grown as the structure of opportunity has become more rigid, and the ‘deterrence’ of stripping irregular migrants of rights has not functioned as intended, as it has not taken into account transnational calculations related to dramatically deteriorating conditions in Zimbabwe (at the time of writing in April 2008, inflation rates top 100 000 per cent and a new round of political violence has followed contested elections). As deportations to Zimbabwe have been suspended for the greater part of the period between 2002 and 2008 due to litigation over the risks on return (following evidence of the interrogation and torture of some deportees), so the pool of irregular migrants from Zimbabwe includes large numbers of failed asylum-seekers, among whom are likely to be significant numbers of de facto refugees (there have been 19 585 asylum applications since 2000, but refusal rates currently run at 74%).

Others who have moved into irregular status include full-time students at the end of their studies, ‘students’ who failed to renew visas (due to more stringent criteria, such as the need to show ‘vertical progression’ in courses), visitors and the dependents of those who have become irregular who feel they cannot return home.

The polarisation of opportunity between Zimbabweans entering through skilled migration routes and those with irregular status has also been enhanced by competition for unskilled work created by the arrival of more than half a million migrants from the new EU Accession states from 2004. Zimbabweans in unskilled jobs perceived a contraction in opportunities, and described how employers suddenly began asking to see papers and agencies with a history of recruiting Zimbabweans shifted to the use of Eastern European workers (on competition between EU/non-EU migrants, see also McIlwaine et al. 2006). The effects of this competition seem likely to have reinforced the importance of Zimbabwean employers, and further squeezed Zimbabweans without papers into niches where they had already established a reputation, such as in care, where language initially seems to have proved a disadvantage to Poles and Lithuanians (McGregor 2007). The gender dimension to polarised opportunities in Britain has probably also become more acute in this process: many of the female nurses and carers I interviewed complained of what they perceived as the acute ‘shortage of quality Zimbabwean men’ in Britain, sometimes naturalising the ‘uselessness’ of their male compatriots unable to find work or gain stability.

The irregular spaces of work in which those without papers are trapped have been discussed in strikingly different terms than in African contexts, though both bodies of literature provide useful insights. In Africanist debates, informal economies have often been celebrated as evidence of survival skills and entrepreneurialism, and discussed in terms of an autonomous moral economy of ‘resistance’. Though tempered by a more recent literature emphasising violence and imbrication with the state (Roitman 2004; Bayart et al. 1999), echoes of older romanticised views remain, as for example in the World Bank’s unsteady oscillation between celebration and criticism (Meagher 2003 2005). In the British context, debates tend to have a different flavour: though illegal work is ‘normalised’ in many sectors of the economy, such as in subcontracted service markets (Williams and Windebank 1998; Anderson and Rogaly 2005), it is commonly discussed as if it were associated solely with the world of marginalised migrants, ignoring other niches, employers’ interests and state policies (Samers 2005; Jordan and Duvell 2002). Increasingly, informal work has been debated within the framework of securitisation and in a sensationalised media language of trafficking and smuggling, and a criminal underworld of abusive gangmasters and labour exploitation (on securitisation, see Huysmans 2006).

Theoretical debates shedding further light on processes of migrant exclusion in Britain draw from different philosophical traditions, despite a shared interest in embodiment: they are useful for exploring the experiences of Zimbabweans lacking papers in different ways. A body of literature on sovereignty and the law draws on Agamben’s theorisation of ‘states of exception’ – legal spaces akin to that of homo sacer in Roman law, which are occupied by categories of people dehumanised and reduced to ‘bare life’, stripped of their rights as citizens and legitimately exposed to injury or harm, whose relationship to the state is through their banishment; they are included solely by virtue of
their exclusion (Agamben 1998 2005). For Agamben, such exceptional legal spaces expand alongside sovereign powers, a process epitomised in the modern world by the law governing the death camps of Nazi Germany, and also the legal spaces of detention of non-citizens in many western European states today (Agamben 1998, 174). Though sometimes discussed in relation to the figure of the refugee, the thresholds of state protection are most appropriately discussed in relation to the proliferating categories of ‘illegal’ migrant and failed asylum-seekers (Zylinska 2005), given the bureaucratic ‘fractioning’ of labels, which accord fewer rights than refugee status (Zetter 2007). Current legislation allows the state to expose irregular migrants to bodily harm by denying rights to work and welfare (leading to destitution), forcible deportation to situations where life is threatened by inadequate medical support systems or by torture and other forms of violence (in the case of de facto refugees without status) and, most recently, denying access to primary health care (MRN 2007). Although there remains a degree of judicial contestation that Agamben does not discuss (Guild 2003; Humphreys 2006), people designated illegal migrants have an acute awareness of dehumanisation and exposure to bodily risk, and of occupying spaces without rights, where anything can happen. Such treatment is important beyond the experiences of those actually caught within these legal spaces, and risks ‘alienating swathes of the immigrant and the black and minority ethnic community’ (MRN 2007).

A second body of work draws on a psychoanalytic literature on ‘abjection’, which also speaks directly to the language in which Zimbabweans without papers spoke of their experiences (Nyers 2003). The Chambers dictionary defines the roots of the verb abject as ‘to throw or cast down or away’, the noun as ‘outcast, a base slave, one in more servile subjection than a subject’. Abjection is a forceful act of division, through which those outcast are imputed with entirely negative characteristics – impurity, criminality, animality, speechlessness, victimhood. ‘Abjection is a matter of the energies, the practices, the works of division that act upon persons and collectivities such that some ways of being, some forms of existence are cast into one of shame, disgrace or debasement, rendered beyond the limits of the liveable, denied the warrant of tolerability, accorded purely a negative value’ (Nikolas Rose, cited in Nyers 2003, 1074). These embodied characteristics stand not only in opposition to the figure of the political subject or citizen, but precede the act of exclusion. Kristeva takes debate over abjection in a different direction that is also relevant to the discussion here: her notion of the abject is focused on human reactions to a potential breakdown of meaning, provoked by confrontation with ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules’ (Kristeva 1982, 4). This eruption of ‘the Real’ can be precipitated by unwilling reminders of our own mortality, by a corpse or human excrement among other things (Kristeva 1982, 3). Her discussion has a particular relevance for those migrants forced into the stereotypically dirty jobs avoided by citizens.

In the ensuing discussion, I hope to avoid the romanticisation of resistance and informality characteristic of some Africanist writing. But I also want to capture the agency of those occupying abject spaces of work in Britain, and thus avoid imputing the abject with the qualities of victimhood implied by their position. There can be a slippage in discussions of abjection that conflates the ‘act of force’ to which those excluded are exposed with an essential condition, both naturalised and undifferentiated. This point has been elaborated in relation to humanitarian discourse on the refugee, and images of camps displaying a voiceless mass of humanity defined only by their need and fear (Malkki 1995; Nyers 2006). Nyers writes against such slippage by using the conjuncture ‘abject cosmopolitanism’ – a deliberate juxtaposition of two opposed concepts, through which he explores irregular migrants’ political agency and challenges to their exclusion, as expressed by participation in anti-deportation and pro-regularisation campaigns (Nyers 2003). Theorising irregular migrants’ experiences as abjection can also be criticised for its tendency to de-historicise, and for its reductive frame of reference: it does not capture the historical production of categories and associations (as for example, the association of blackness with servility and dirt in colonial contexts) and their legacies, nor does it convey the transnational dimensions to migrants’ own sense of location and their material linkages.

I hope to further such discussion of the agency, networks and perspectives of those filling abject spaces in Britain, by exploring not only public assertions of political voice, but also the transnational calculations that continue to render abject
spaces of work attractive, highlighting the adept means by which Zimbabweans have navigated British labour markets to secure their own and others’ entry, investigating the ‘moral economies’ (and not only the abuses) of informality, and emphasising the importance of trajectories over time and space. I emphasise the diversity of reactions and circumstances of those occupying abject spaces, as people are placed variously in terms of family social networks, cultural and economic capital, and their connections and frames of reference extend beyond the borders of the British state. By so doing, I hope to underline the importance of discussing abjection in relation to historical processes and the creation of legal spaces of exclusion rather than a putative underclass of people occupying them.

Navigating abject spaces

The popular Zimbabwean discourses surrounding movement to Britain are a useful starting point for exploring meanings and experiences, as they cast the process of moving to the UK in contradictory terms, both as a mark of status in itself but also as subjection to dirty, demeaning, feminised work. This is captured in jokes that associate Zimbabweans in the UK with cleaning and carework, caricaturing them as ‘BBC’ (British Bottom Cleaners), ‘bum technicians’ or ‘madot.com’ (dot implying dirt; and dot.com invoking the dependence of the diaspora on internet connections) (Mbiba 2004; McGregor 2007). These jokes, which function partly as a putdown by those still at home, deploy the language of loss of status, even of abjection. The jokes were elaborated in interviews with accounts of the shame and humiliation associated with being ‘seen as low’, the disgust of handling dirt and for men, of emasculation. People often described this as one dimension of their experience even if they also felt satisfaction in helping others, developed emotional bonds with the clients they cared for and friendships with colleagues, or had positively opted for carework, given its flexibility and the possibilities of relatively high earnings. The phenomenon of the ‘BBC’ has been widely discussed in the press in Zimbabwe, and has been used by President Mugabe to hurl contempt at those who have left for Britain and to emphasise their exclusion, sneering at those ‘who will be thrown out and return crippled in wheelchairs, clutching their pounds’. But the idea of the BBC also conveys much about postcoloniality: about the way people looked up to the motherland and its institutions, as well as about the crude bodily realities and intimacies of servile work, with overtones of colonial master/servant relations. The jokes also convey something of the dishonesty and difficulties in communications between those in the diaspora and those at home (madot.com, in particular), by the disjuncture between the status attached to regular use of modern communications’ technologies and dealing with dirt.

The notion of broken postcolonial responsibilities is particularly important in underpinning these reactions, and is enmeshed with an emphasis on race. The policy of privileging EU migrants over Commonwealth migrants in unskilled work was widely discussed as a betrayal, and as evidence of racism (cf. McIlwaine et al. 2006, 19–20). ‘We are your children’ is a phrase I heard repeatedly in describing postcolonial relationships and responsibilities dishonoured, ‘we were taught your history, taught to look up to you, to want to be like you’.

What makes me feel angry and very bitter here, we’re in the UK because of our history, because of the commonwealth, we were shaped by that history, but now preferential treatment is going to Europeans over Africans, it’s racism.

Of course, the demonisation of foreigners and asylum-seekers in the tabloid press has also contributed to the sense of alienation from Britain, affecting a wider community than simply those in irregular circumstances.

For some, informality in itself was an assault on status – on long-cultivated notions of respectability and traditions of public service. There were diverse reactions, but for many of those coming from Zimbabwe’s professions, who had little prior engagement with the informal economy, the experience of taking on false names and papers, or posing as someone else, was very stressful. Many were ill-prepared for negotiating the world of bogus agencies and colleges or unscrupulous lawyers and employers – their experiences were of being ripped off and exploited in their first months in Britain (by other Zimbabweans, by a range of British employers, as well as other longer established African and other migrants). While a number of Zimbabwean asylum-seeker support groups quickly sprang up to provide crucial assistance to those trying to negotiate the pitfalls of a rapidly changing asylum system, mobilising formally
to provide help in relation to the world of work was more difficult, given the vulnerability to deportation of those working illegally.

The pervasive fear of deportation is, of course, centrally important to those without papers, even for those who had not experienced violence at the hands of the Zimbabwean state. Many of those who spoke to me most freely about their experiences of illegality were talking of the past, having managed to regularise their status. One such, a woman (a secretary in Zimbabwe who worked irregularly in Britain before training as a nurse), recalled how fear had engulfed her:

I was very scared those first few months, I didn’t want to show my face, all the time I was worrying about being arrested, what would I say, what would happen. My heart would be thumping when I saw a policeman in the street, what can you say when you know you’re illegal? I really wanted to be legal, I hate that illegal life, you’re always worried, always afraid. People were telling me other Zimbabweans will inform on you, so I didn’t want to meet or talk to others … then one I knew was deported, so those rumours were true, I heard that £500 is what the informers are paid for that information.\(^11\)

A man and his wife (former teachers, working irregularly in care) pointed out how fearful it was to be aware of living beyond the threshold of state protection:

you don’t have your basic rights without the papers, people treat you like trash, trample on you, you’re not a human being, push you around – who will protect or stop them from killing you?.\(^12\)

Given that lack of papers acted as an insurmountable ‘brick wall’ blocking advancement in Britain, some have accommodated their exclusion and the prospect of deportation into their strategy for remittances, making sure not to accumulate property and finance in the UK that might be lost: ‘I had a friend who is worried about the deportations’ one carer described,

she’s waiting for the call from immigration. So what she did, she packed all her property, and shipped it back home with a removal company. Now she has a small suitcase on top of the cupboard, it’s ready packed. So when immigration come to the door, she will grab the suitcase and she is prepared, all her property is already transferred back home. When they come, she’ll go and just get a free ticket home.\(^13\)

Notwithstanding such responses to exclusion, it would be a mistake to cast all those in Britain without papers as necessarily more closely enmeshed with networks extending to home. One failed asylum-seeker I visited while on hunger-strike described himself as having been in Britain ‘in hiding’ and ‘on the run’ since 2000, thanks partly to irresponsible representation by his solicitor, and had cut all ties with family and others back home from the outset, for fear of being tracked down: he had moved around the country in casual work, before developing a stable relationship with a black British woman of Afro-Caribbean origin. Trying to find material on the web that might assist his asylum claim provided little information to help his case, but uncovered a wealth of material on his broken ties with his Zimbabwean family, who had initially posted repeated pleas for information of his whereabouts on a range of diasporic media sites.\(^14\)

For some of those who fled violence, fear and insecurity in Britain have proved too much, and have cost people their lives. The six Zimbabweans who feature among the recent suicides of asylum-seekers and detainees documented by the Institute of Race Relations are indicative: they include Kwanene Siziba, aged 27, who fell 150 feet to her death, when bailiffs whom she believed were immigration officers threatened to kick in the door; Forsina Makoni, an elderly 79-year-old woman who set herself alight after her asylum claim was rejected; Edmore Ngwenya, a 26-year-old failed asylum-seeker facing deportation, who died after jumping into a canal. A further two suicides were the result of lack of access to medical treatment; Lizwane Ndlovu, a failed asylum-seeker, who died from TB in hospital two weeks after being released from detention following a hunger strike, and Star Engwenya, a destitute and mentally unstable asylum-seeker, who had failed to access treatment after suffering a stroke (Institute of Race Relations 2006, 6, 13, 22, 23). This is but a small number of the suicides and other deaths that have actually occurred, which have had ramifications way beyond those immediately involved, as community organisations and faith groups have stepped in to help – to offer emotional support to those bereaved, to deal with authorities in place of relatives/friends lacking papers themselves and to help raise funds to repatriate bodies (at a cost of around £3000 per body, Mbiba 2006; see also ZimCare 2007). The head of a small network of Brethren in Christ house churches in the Midlands described being asked to intervene personally in
five suicide cases.\textsuperscript{15} It is unlikely that this is exceptional.

But the experience of living and working in abject spaces in Britain has not turned those occupying them into a universally victimised ‘abject class’. Migration to Britain has worked for some of those without papers, despite the insecurity and other costs: in transnational and transgenerational terms, it has often been a successful strategy. For some, it has allowed for the reproduction of elite or middle class status, or for social mobility, enabling the accumulation of high status assets, new qualifications and good education for children – as well as preventing the starvation of those at home. One illustration can be provided by a mother from a politically well-connected family with property in the former white suburbs who left Zimbabwe in 2001 to fund the higher education of her sons and worked informally under a false name as a live-in carer following a failed asylum claim made on arrival. By the middle of 2007, her eldest son was in the final stages of his accountancy qualifications in the UK, and she had successfully completed an Open University BSc in Business Studies. When her son secures his first professional job, she plans to retire to Zimbabwe to rest, as her son will be in a position to take over maintaining the family’s elite status. She envisages him assuming the greater part of the burden of remitting funds to support those back in Zimbabwe and securing his siblings’ education. Other examples from my interviews include two teachers working as carers, likewise supporting their children’s secondary/higher education; a former mechanic turned asylum-seeker/manual worker supporting a sibling’s studies at the University of Zimbabwe, and a number of others funding their own studies or building themselves houses in Zimbabwe.\textsuperscript{16}

The experience of abjection has not universally silenced all those living and working without papers, and some have been vocal in resistance. Aside from the specifically Zimbabwean protests – the Vigil in London outside Zimbabwe House (attended both by those with and without status), hunger strikes in detention centres and campaigns against deportation to Zimbabwe – Zimbabweans without papers as well as those in Britain legally have joined broader campaigns, such as the London living wage campaign, Strangers into Citizens and other movements for regularisation. As Jane Wills has argued, counteracting low pay in the context of globalised, subcontracted economies has necessitated new modes of organising, allowing ‘the politics of class to escape the confines of the workplace to infect a wider set of publics’ (Wills 2006, 13).

These campaigns that are re-animating the politics of work have embraced the energies and organisational capacities of recent migrants from middle class and elite backgrounds working in the UK formally and informally as cleaners, carers, security guards and the like. There has also been much informal resistance to the injustices that flourish in subcontracted labour markets, as those with rights have extended various types of support and help to suffering relatives, friends and compatriots. Given the difficulty of organising around the ‘right to work’ (except within the framework of the campaigns noted above), there have been informal efforts to marginalise unscrupulous employers and agencies that bond and exploit labourers – by advising people of alternative employers or by organising to provide employment. When one new Zimbabwean employment agency was set up in 2004 (providing temporary labour in care, cleaning, catering and security), the managing director (a former opposition activist with refugee status) described his motivation as being to assist those in a situation of bonded labour in the only way he felt possible – by providing work for compatriots himself. By offering better terms of employment, the agency was able to take over the workforce of another Zimbabwean agency with a notorious reputation for exploiting irregular workers, whose boss was infamous for boasting about the property and girlfriends he had accumulated in the UK.\textsuperscript{17} The discourses and practices of ‘helping’ that blur relations between employer and employee in subcontracted work allow for abuse, but can also provide support and minimal security in a context where the state does not. Some of those working without their papers referred to the agencies that employed them not only as a ‘foot in the door’ in the early days before they had a support network, but also as a ‘protection of some sort’, and ‘safety net’. One such – a former banker turned failed asylum-seeker working as a carer – described how it was better to get work with other agencies (rather than with a Zimbabwean agency that underpaid), but felt that the Zimbabwean agency was useful as a last resort if you face a problem [with your employer] you can go back, at least you have your own people there, they feel for you, they’re not strict with papers, they identify with you.\textsuperscript{18}
There is also enormous resistance to being defined by unskilled work. Some described doing manual work less as an assault on their own status or class position, but rather as an encounter with the British class system. As a former university lecturer, briefly an ‘overstayer’ who found himself lifting boxes in a supermarket warehouse in the UK, explained to me:

I never thought that I would be doing manual work, but it has been a good experience in some ways, it has opened my mind: now I understand the infamous British class system; I have been teaching Marx all these years, but now I understand what he was talking about!19

Others spoke of themselves as sojourners, joked about doing gap years, or described themselves as observers and critics of British society, such as a pastor (working as a security guard), who felt two things had saved him from going under in Britain – his wife and the training the church had given him in anthropology.20 As many of those in informal work were also studying, or had aspirations to do so, they defined their stay in Britain by their studies rather than in terms of the work that supported it. As long as doing servile work could be cast in terms of personal and professional uplift, or as a temporary break, even a learning experience, so it could be upheld positively as a means to self advancement, greater knowledge, further qualifications. Metaphors of stepping stones, ladders and the like were frequently used: a husband and wife, former teachers, both of whom were studying while doing unskilled work in Britain and supporting children’s education at home expressed their situation in the following terms:

We’re using carework as a stepping stone, to move on and up. Then you see you’re doing something for the future, you need to see you’re progressing upwards personally . . . if you stay put it’s bad.21

Nonetheless, the legal barriers, increased competition from migrants from within the EU, and frustrations over lack of opportunities outside health and social care are forcing many people to re-evaluate their options. As conditions in Zimbabwe have deteriorated over their stay, so, for most, returning home is not a viable possibility and relatives back home are reliant on their remittances. Many of those who despair of regularising their status here and have tired of menial work, or find that the new professional qualifications they have achieved cannot be deployed, are redefining themselves as ‘southern African’ and looking to South Africa in particular, or are casting their future careers as ‘in the international circuit’ (McGregor 2007 2008). It does seem plausible to suggest that over a longer period, if conditions at home improve, irregular migrants’ transnational calculations are likely to take them back to Zimbabwe or the region, given the legal barriers in Britain. Yet the contradictory effects of legal exclusion noted above mean that failed asylum-seekers and others without papers can become isolated and trapped in Britain in a manner that has compounded the problems of relocating. Those here irregularly have not been in a position to move freely to-and-fro between Zimbabwe and the UK, and as their stay in Britain becomes more protracted, so for some, the combination of lengthy separation from families and the shame of being seen to have failed risks stretching relationships to breaking point, such that those who are most insecure can also sometimes be most detached from home.

Emerging class cleavages and class identities in the diaspora

Returning to the issue of whether or not it is meaningful to talk about the effects of British state migration policies in terms of shifting class identities or emerging class cleavages within new diasporas in the UK, it is clear that there are contradictory trends. On the one hand, any such emergent class differences created by differential opportunities for earning or legal status are cross cut by multiple diasporic networks and a common idea of Zimbabwe as home, as well as by other intersecting axes of differentiation. Many diaspora associations are blind to differences created by work and the law – the various strands of long-distance nationalism in the diaspora are perhaps more riven by accusations of infiltration by agents of Zimbabwe’s ruling party, ethnic and racial cleavages than they are by class divides, while families have often been destabilised by rifts over gender relations. It is not only moral economies of informal work that bring people together across the divides of legal status, but also Zimbabwean politics, protests and campaigns, churches, burial associations, football clubs, braais (barbecues), weddings, funerals and the like (McGregor forthcoming). Indeed, the mutual support provided by diaspora associational life is important partly
because it can provide not only material and practical help, but also connections and a sense of belonging where status is judged within a different frame of reference and not in terms of work in Britain, providing spaces where ‘you can feel at home a little bit’, 22 and where ‘people know where you come from and don’t look on you as low’. 23 One church fellowship leader explained:

we try to provide a space where the stress can come down and where there is some support. Otherwise, without something to turn to people can end up hanging themselves. We pray for each other. Know where you’re coming from, that’s what I advise. Take whatever you can get and don’t argue [as you don’t have rights], treat it as a stepping stone to something else. 24

A further factor working against class cleavages among Zimbabweans in the UK is the fact that interactions with black and white working classes in Britain appear to be fostering a common sense of class identification and middle class status (regardless of work), reinforced through discourses of ‘African values’ of respect for education, family and authority (sometimes patriarchal authority) (McGregor 2008). Indeed, class has been one of the key elements of tension between Africans and Afro-Caribbeans in Britain: as one woman whose remittances were funding children through one of Zimbabwe’s top private schools (a refugee doing care work, who had worked for the family business at home) explained:

they hate us because we’re middle class, we’re better off, have professions, we value education, we’re not raw, then there is that history of slavery that disrupts and raises its head. 25

Yet the differences created by work, income and legal status do also matter, and are being treated as significant in some contexts by Zimbabweans themselves. Some of those with secure status and middle class jobs, who are increasingly well embedded in the British context through mortgages and children in British schools, can echo the right-wing British tabloid press, by repeating the state’s categorical differences, complaining that Zimbabwean asylum-seekers are mostly economic migrants rather than political refugees, criticising their compatriots who try to bend the rules and blaming them for giving all Zimbabweans a bad name: some deliberately try to avoid Zimbabwean events where they might meet asylum-seekers and others without status. 26

Improving yourself here is good, but do it the right way, if you have to live here, get your papers right . . . they’re catching a lot of people. People will try to bend all the rules. I don’t blame the British government, they shouldn’t be here, and then those who are doing that are making things worse for those of us who are here legitimately. 27

Such attitudes have been reported for other immigrant groups, indeed conservatism as a reaction to the difficulties of being a first generation migrant is part of a well-developed stereotype. But tension between those with regular and irregular status is only one cleavage, which can be amplified and overlaid by others. As most Zimbabweans in the UK come from families used to drawing on the labour of maids and other servants, more than one female asylum-seeker spoke to me of rifts with close friends, after attempts had been made to use them as free child-care and domestic aids. An Ndebele nurse described her motivation for not mixing with others as a combination of dislike of exile Zimbabwean politics (of the ruling party, of MDC factionalism and Ndebele separatism), of Shonas and of people who tried to deploy her to look after children:

my advice to any newcomer – don’t mingle! [with other Zimbabweans] especially at work, I don’t want to be associated with Zimbabwe when I am at work, because others are abusing our image, tarnishing it – a Zimbabwean did this or that – it makes people hate us more. Don’t mingle, I say. I can phone my close friends in [another city] if I need support, but you need to be careful who you deal with. These with children will want to take advantage, the Shonas they want to Shonalize us here again. 28

The combination of fear and the practicalities of life on the margins of the law for those without papers can also reinforce divisions created by legal status. Many of those without papers deliberately keep a very limited network of friends – out of fear of the Home Office, Zimbabwean politics, informers or shame. One man, who came forward to the Zimbabwe Association for assistance in 2008 after move about the country seeking work or due to policies of dispersal in the asylum system. A man with refugee status (a businessman and shopkeeper in Zimbabwe) explained why he had...
not formed a burial society with his friends, most of whom were in irregular situations, in the following way:

it’s very difficult to organise something like that, most people want it, I wanted it, but to organise a group is very hard. Those societies, you need to meet at weekends, to see each other regularly. But we can’t do that, because of the work pattern, and because you find your friends are scattered, they move around, they can be dispersed as asylum-seekers, or they’ll move to try to find a better opportunity, or their agency will move them, or they’ll be worried about deportations, it’s very hard. You find that you just can’t get together regularly one time a week, which is what you need in those groups.30

Another refugee with status (formerly a trainee accountant, but working in a warehouse in the UK to support siblings at university in Zimbabwe) described how friends with irregular status withdrew contact – ‘disappeared’ – when fear of deportations resumed: ‘out of fear, everyone is keeping himself to himself’.31 Many others described themselves as ‘too tired’ to go to Zimbabwean churches or other community events.32 The interviews with those with irregular status were striking for the evidence of ultra-mobility within Britain, for the frequency of double shifts, descriptions of exhaustion and depression, and lack of social engagement beyond work and close family or friends.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper was to think through the impact of sharply polarised opportunities on the shaping of the new Zimbabwean diaspora in the UK, and to discuss the relevance or otherwise of talking in terms of class processes and challenges to class identifications. This is important in the context of a literature on diaspora that often overlooks class, despite the evidence of growing inequalities among recent migrants, and the on-going relevance of class as a dimension of self-identification and popular discourse in Britain. By discussing any incipient social divisions created by work and legal status in Britain, I do not wish to imply that these are more important than other diasporic divides, as political, ethnic and gender tensions, for example, appear to have been amplified in some British contexts, and intersect with class processes. Moreover Zimbabwean diaspora political associations, unlike African diaspora associations that function to preserve elite status (Mohan 2006), though fractious and operating in a climate of distrust, are notable for drawing people in diverse circumstances together through a shared commitment to transformation at home or to offer mutual assistance, irrespective of legal status or class. I wanted to examine Zimbabwean discourses and experiences in such a way as to reflect the multiple frames of reference influencing notions of class, which encompass social worlds reaching beyond the polarised opportunities in Britain and are influenced by attitudes towards status at home.

I hope to have shown the inadequacies of reading off class identity from the work Zimbabweans and other recent migrants are doing in the UK, yet interactions at British workplaces and with British discourses of class are nonetheless contributing to the shaping of self identifications in contradictory ways.

In this study of Zimbabweans in the UK I have emphasised the polarising and unequal experiences in Britain, rather than the ‘levelling’ dimension emphasised in other studies (Akyeampong 2000; Vasta and Kandilige 2007), even though professionals with transferable skills also suffer a loss of status in a system that does not recognise overseas experience, and may share experiences such as racism, reactions to gender or parenting norms in Britain. The polarisation of opportunity clearly has the potential to foster differences within diasporic communities in Britain over time, has already done so in some contexts, and feeds into decisions about future mobility as well as into the discourses and dynamics of status back home. While interactions at British workplaces and with British discourses of class are contributing to Zimbabweans’ own narratives of class position, the cross-cutting networks and the multiple frames of reference in which transnational migrants operate mean that doing servile work and ‘being looked on as low’ has not translated into a sense of being working class, but can elevate the importance of middle class identities and status linked to home, combined with strategies of personal advancement through education, accumulation of assets and support for family, and investment in the education and status of the next generation. Highlighting this dynamic should not mean underestimating the practical difficulties migrants face in trying to get by on low wages, particularly on the margins of the law, but rather draws attention to transnational networks and highlights the additional strain of trying to meet
social aspirations and family obligations in contexts where options for manoeuvre are often highly constrained (Datta et al. 2007).

The theoretical debates over abjection and the dehumanisation of selected categories of non-citizen have thrown some light on the experiences of insecurity, abuses and exposure to bodily harm on the part of those without papers and highlight a disturbing trajectory. Yet even within these abject legal spaces, some people have been able to accumulate qualifications, perpetuate middle class or elite status at home and/or in intergenerational terms. Given the differential circumstances and networks of people working informally, the article underlines the importance of using the notion of abjection for analysing the socio-legal spaces of exclusion rather than a putative ‘class’ of victimised migrants occupying them. This highlights both the vulnerabilities created by state policies that have criminalised select categories of migrants who have been stripped of their rights, as well as the agency of migrants themselves and the transnational logic that continues to propel people to take on the risks of occupying such spaces. Notwithstanding Zimbabweans’ involvement in multiple crosscutting provisional networks linking diverse people and places, and providing more than one frame of reference for judging and assuming status, the article nonetheless aimed to emphasise the importance of legal status and British state policy for the emerging dynamics of new African diasporas in the UK.

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Notes

1 Nyers credits the original use of the term to S. Bell, ‘Abject class’, unpublished conference paper, presented at University of Massachusetts, 21–24 September 2000 (Nyers 2003, 1090, endnote 3).

2 This research involved interviews with black Zimbabweans only. White Zimbabweans had a different relationship to the law, as the majority were able to claim citizenship through their grandparents.

3 The exceptions are revealing: my interviewees suggested that some of those most happy with life in the UK came from servile positions, for whom independence and assets such as a car were unimaginable back home – e.g. the maids some families brought over in the 1990s, and others who managed to get here somehow, such as ‘boys’ from the bus ranks. Interview 80.

4 Interview 57, nurse who trained in Britain after several years in carework; interview, 43 careworker.

5 Home Office quarterly asylum statistics. http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds. Asylum has been eroded by reduced access to legal aid, a dramatic fall in the number of firms taking on asylum cases, reduced rights of appeal, and many unsafe decisions. Zimbabwean asylum-seeker support organisations have raised concerns over cases heard in 2000–2 (the majority), when the asylum system was overloaded and claims were judged in relation to an inadequate country report, disputed nationality cases (Zimbabweans treated as Malawians/South Africans due to false papers), the effects of dispersal and detention on access to representation and a range of other issues. See, for example, Zimbabwe Association submission to the Independent Asylum Commission, 2008.

6 Interviews 35–41 (unskilled warehouse workers), 12, 9 (careworkers).

7 For example, interviews 57 and 58.

8 Interview 80, discussing President Mugabe’s interventions in 2004.

9 For example, interviews 49 and 50.

10 Teacher, retrained as nurse, interview 67.

11 Interview 56.

12 Interviews 10 and 11.

13 Interview 32.

14 Visits to hunger strikers, Campsfield House, June 2005.

15 Interview 44.

16 Interviews 76, 42, 43, 10, 11.


18 Interview 21.


20 Interview 44.

21 Interviews 10 and 11.

22 Interview 31.

23 Interview 9, careworker and dependent of asylum-seeker, a secretary in Zimbabwe, married to a university lecturer.

24 Interview 44.

25 Interview 26.

26 Interview, two teachers in professional jobs, interviews 49 and 50.

27 Group interview, with three nurses and one student/waiter, interviewees 61–63.

28 Interview 26.
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