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Blair Rutherford

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
An unsettled belonging: Zimbabwean farm workers in Limpopo Province, South Africa

Blair Rutherford*

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

The emplacement of displaced Zimbabweans depends on the particular political economies and the modes of belonging operating at the sites at which they find themselves. This is shown by examining the situation of Zimbabweans working or seeking work on commercial farms in northern Limpopo Province, South Africa, in the border zone with Zimbabwe. As Zimbabweans flee their country in part to find a cash currency that has more value than the Zimbabwean dollar, their Zimbabwean citizenship gives them a particular symbolic currency in these jobs. Many of the border zone farmers are keen to employ them as their desperation for work typically predisposes them to work harder and often for lower wages than South Africans. Yet this latter currency is also shaped by public debates and institutional practices regarding ‘Zimbabweans’ in the wider political economy of South Africa, which in turn inform the circulation, conditions, and vulnerabilities of these Zimbabweans on the farms.

Keywords: migration; South Africa; Zimbabwe; citizenship; farm workers; sovereignty

Zimbabweans have been working on farms in northern South Africa for a long time, probably since shortly after they were settled by Afrikaners in the early twentieth century. In the 1990s, Zimbabweans who came to the farms located in northern Limpopo province did so almost exclusively because of dwindling economic opportunities in Zimbabwe, largely as a consequence of the adoption of a structural adjustment policy in 1990 (Zinyama 2002). As others have noted, this transnational movement was facilitated by the ‘opening up’ in post-apartheid South Africa that attracted increased numbers of immigrants from other parts of Africa, even though apartheid immigration policies and attitudes continued to hold sway in the 1990s (Crush 1998; Harris 2001). However, those who have crossed the border since 2000 to live and work in Limpopo province are part of an extremely large number of Zimbabweans leaving the ceaseless economic and political ‘meltdown’ (Solidarity Peace Trust 2006) pervading their nation. Tens of thousands of Zimbabweans ‘border-jump’ across the Limpopo River annually by various means, with deportations increasing from 40,000 in 2000 to over 127,000 in 2006 and at least 117,000 in the first six months of 2007 (Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2007,18; Powell 2007; Salopek 2007).

Though most Zimbabweans crossing into South Africa hope to pursue livelihoods elsewhere, many end up working on the border farms in Limpopo, typically as seasonal pickers or packshed workers, with some finding permanent jobs. On the 200 or so South African commercial farms found north of the Soutpansberg range, estimates suggest 70% to 85% of the farm workers are Zimbabwean. At least 15,000 to 20,000 of them are

*Email: blair_rutherford@carleton.ca
working and living in the 70 kilometre wide, semi-arid strip comprised largely of citrus, horticultural and game farms mostly owned and operated by Afrikaners, commonly enduring adverse working and living conditions (see Rutherford and Addison 2007). Zimbabweans in these positions subject themselves to such work conditions in an effort to earn rands. The South African currency has great purchasing power in Zimbabwe as the value of the Zimbabwean dollar has plummeted drastically since 2000. Whereas the hardships endured by Zimbabweans in search of ‘hard’ currency have helped to ensure a profitable expansion of export agriculture in Limpopo, the Zimbabwean presence has taken on a particular symbolic capital of its own in public discourses. This is due in part to where they are located in the dominant socio-political geography of South Africa. Political, media and activist commentators tend to appraise Zimbabweans on white farms differently from Zimbabweans working elsewhere in South Africa: here they are not viewed as refugees but as a particular type of worker. The designation ‘farm worker’ carries a particular moral valence in South Africa.

I treat the ‘currency’ of this transborder farm work, for a people marked by displacement, as informed by the contested ‘modes of belonging’ through which they are emplaced in South Africa. I examine how farm work undertaken by Zimbabweans on white-operated commercial farms north of the Soutpansberg mountains and south of the Limpopo River is discursively situated by the symbolic bordered location of white farms in post-apartheid South Africa.

This article is based on ethnographic research carried out in two trips of a few months each in 2004 and 2005 where, among several research methods used, I interviewed various farm workers, farmers, government and NGO officials and spent time on farms around Musina in northern Limpopo. I examine a convergence of two political economies – that of displacement, marked by Zimbabweans fleeing the grim prospects and in some cases personal persecution in their home country to seek out livelihoods through social and economic channels they perceive open to them; and that of export (white) agriculture in a neoliberal policy environment, drawing on accumulated capitals and networks forged during the apartheid era if not earlier. But such political economies, and the livelihoods and forms of accumulation associated with and generating them, are indelibly entangled in a cultural politics of identity and belonging informing both the routes and roots of social agency and their contestations. Although the changing forms of social agency on the farms themselves are crucial (see Du Toit 1993 and 2003; Ewert and Du Toit 2005; Moseley 2007; and Rutherford 2001 for a specifically Zimbabwean example), in this article I focus on the competing practices and significations concerning ‘sovereignty’ which have led to a very unsettled, if not tumultuous, sense of belonging for these Zimbabweans.

Currency carries several meanings here. As these Zimbabweans seek rands in South Africa, their ability to do so is informed by another kind of value – that attached to Zimbabweans on South African border zone farms and more generally in the wider mass-mediated nation. Crossing the Limpopo River and remaining in northern South Africa often leads the thousands of Zimbabwean men, women, and children into economic practices in which being ‘Zimbabwean’ marks them as possible workers, albeit often poorly remunerated. Many of the border zone farmers are keen to employ them as their desperation for work typically predisposes them to work harder and often for lower wages than South Africans. Yet their value as workers is also shaped by wider public debates and institutional practices regarding Zimbabweans in the overall political economy of South Africa, which in turn inform their circulation, conditions, and vulnerabilities on the farms. To trace the ways in which these Zimbabweans are emplaced and potentially displaced...
in northern Limpopo Province—along with how they are valued ambivalently as Zimbabweans, I use the concepts of ‘modes of belonging’ and ‘sovereignty’.

‘Modes of belonging’ refers to the routinised discourses, social practices and institutional arrangements that define particular forms of recognition that shape access to material and nonmaterial resources; the ways in which one becomes incorporated into particular places (Rutherford 2008). Moreover, as Hammar (2002, 228) argues, a specific mode of belonging can include or generate a certain ‘sense of belonging’ for those living by or creating its terms. This may be an intangible but sometimes visceral structure of feeling linked ‘to a sense of entitlement to occupy and use a given space’; or, in contrast, it can generate a ‘sense of not belonging’ there. Such sentiments are informed by practices and discourses shaping ways of life in a particular locale as well as by memories and attachments to other places, including those generated through experiences of displacement.1

The mode of belonging of interest here is that related to the commercial farms themselves. It refers to the practices of authority and power relations that configure access to various resources, let alone to the farm itself. This shapes the particular labour relations and living conditions on the farm. Moreover, the mode of belonging associated with commercial farms shapes responses to Zimbabwean farm workers in the national policy and mass-mediated debates. In relation to this, the concept of mode of belonging also refers to the ways in which white farmers are recognised hegemonically as public actors within South Africa. Thus, the mode of belonging that defines the relationship of white farmers to the nation affects more generally how Zimbabwean farm workers are represented and understood by various South Africans, including within-state and nonstate organisations. Under such conditions, being Zimbabwean takes on particular meanings for those working for white farmers, as it becomes entangled in much wider and more complex histories and politics. This raises the topic of sovereignty, one that is central to the perils, possibilities, and paths of manoeuvrability for Zimbabwean farm workers in South Africa, and for those who advocate about or for them.

Sovereignty here is predicated on distinctions delimiting public authority over life and place. It includes the definition of boundaries over who is included and excluded from membership in the delimited territoriosity, and designating those who have the ability to exercise that authority. Following anthropological interpretations (Das and Poole 2004; Hansen and Stepputat 2001, 2005; Moore 2005), sovereignty is not the exclusive domain of the nation-state. In addition, it is taken to be performative, embedded in routinised practices and particular social figures, and contestable, as different sovereigns seek to shape relations ‘between people and place, subjects and territory’ (Moore 2005, 220). These scholars have usefully focused on the overlapping and at times competing sovereignties that emerged from the colonial-era bifurcated administration that distinguished between ‘citizen’ and ‘subject’ (Mamdani 1996). An example of such a parallel, competing authority could be chiefs or ‘big men’ who ‘command zones of local sovereign power not entirely “penetrated” or governed by the state – neither by biopolitics, nor by languages of legality – and are still approached by governmental agencies through mediators as it happened during colonial rule’ (Hansen and Stepputat 2001, 30–1). My focus here is on exploring commercial farms as zones of localised sovereign power, and border zones as places where hegemonic forms of state sovereignty are actively performed while, and yet often highly ambivalent (Chalfin 2006; Roitman 2004).

Farm workers have long been a crucial currency through which white commercial farmer sovereignty is transacted in southern Africa. They have been the main targets of commercial farmers’ interventions in the relations ‘between people and place, subjects
and territory’ in embodied demonstrations of the latter’s authority and rule. Yet, in turn, this sovereignty has been contested in various ways and intensities by different state and non-state institutions and individuals in the name of national sovereignty (see Rutherford 2008). When the citizenship of most of the workers is foreign, and the farms are located in this spatially and symbolically ambivalent border zone, then the public interest in the value of Zimbabwean farm workers, with respect to issues of sovereignty, is even greater. This makes the currency of being Zimbabwean highly ambivalent and charged for these farm workers.

Such ambivalence can also envelop those researching their situation, particularly depending on the researcher’s own race, gender and citizenship. In my own case, I was someone marked as a white Canadian man, clearly wealthier than the Zimbabwean workers among whom I was conducting my research. At the same time, I was able to speak chiShona, knew something about Zimbabwean locations and ways of living, and was clearly interested in the lives of these Zimbabweans. Consequently, for many of the workers I was seen as someone who could be both beneficial to them (as a potential patron or advocate) and a threat (by using knowledge against workers, such as telling South African authorities about illegal practices or as someone who may benefit a few over others). In short, my research was shaped simultaneously by the dynamics of the particular mode of belonging and the issues of sovereignty which entangled Zimbabwean workers themselves, a point to which I shall return later.

I suggest that deploying these concepts in analysing Zimbabwean farm workers in northern Limpopo provides insight into some of the social dynamics of the livelihood possibilities available to these displaced Zimbabweans. It also sheds light on wider public perceptions of them. Such conditions inform the political economic contours of their particular form of displacement. In the sections that follow, I sketch out how different kinds of sovereign power condition the options and relations of Zimbabwean farm workers in northern South Africa. These different sovereign powers delineate the boundaries of rule and the zones of contestation that define the particular mode of belonging operating on the farms in this border zone. I also aim to provide insights into specific regimes of incorporation of Zimbabweans on commercial farms, the particular forms of work through which they are emplaced in South Africa, and how ‘being Zimbabwean’ in this part of South Africa is transacted and interpreted. In other words, I ask how the pursuit of South African monetary currency by a particular population of displaced Zimbabweans is configured by the interplay between a particular mode of belonging found on these border farms, and the wider state that marks these Zimbabweans as a certain form of symbolic currency in the debates about sovereignty. I begin by outlining the risks that Zimbabweans take first by crossing the border to seek work and a fragile security in South Africa.

Risking the border

In the border zone between these two sovereign states, the Zimbabwean border-jumpers encounter figures explicitly or potentially representing sovereign authorities who may uphold the rules and laws concerning humans entering and leaving their territories, or may decide to make exceptions. On the Zimbabwean side of the Limpopo, there are usually no explicit representatives of the state, save for those at the official border crossing at Beit Bridge and occasional operations by the Zimbabwe National Army.2 Fences are also rare, making it common to find cattle from Zimbabwean smallholder farmers grazing for whatever sparse vegetation they can find on the river bed itself.
Rather, the figures whom border-jumpers most commonly encounter on the Zimbabwean side are young men called *maguma-guma*; those ‘parasites’ (as one farm worker put it) who seek money and goods ‘the easy way’. Although such men might offer services for a fee to help border-jumpers to get into South Africa, they are more commonly depicted as thieves who could rob, beat, rape or kill you. Often operating in gangs, they have emerged as potentially malicious figures on the Zimbabwean side of the border in the last eight years. Their presence has become so common that many of the Zimbabweans I talked to assumed they were in cahoots with the Zimbabwean police or local politicians. ‘How else can they patrol the area, rob and rape and kill people without any repercussions?’ was the refrain I heard from Zimbabweans on the South African farms. In times and spaces in which authority figures are unclear, one never knows whether the power of the state lies behind the actions of those who may appear to be ‘lawless’ (Roitman 2004).

Crossing the river border itself is generally easy during the dry season as there are numerous dry areas on the Limpopo that one can traverse. But this becomes dangerous during the short rainy season, typically commencing in December, when one has to deal with potentially rushing waters as well as crocodiles. Once on the South African side, the border-jumpers face 137 kilometres of three parallel fences running along most of the border. In 2005 it was patrolled by a South African National Defence Force (SANDF) company of approximately 160 soldiers stationed in small camps at regular intervals inside the fence. There are parts of the border that are not fenced, but where fences exist they have gates here and there, placed in front of adjacent farms to allow farmers to manage their irrigation pipes on their property leading into the Limpopo River. Farm owners or designated employees as well as soldiers all have keys to these gates.

Strategies to cross the South African side of the international boundary south of the river are varied and inventive. They range from carrying wire-cutters to seeking intelligence on the movement of soldiers or about places where the fence is already cut or where there is no fence, to arranging with farm employees or soldiers to open the fence gates, to bribing soldiers if one is caught. The risks include facing attacks by wild animals, being captured by SANDF army patrols along the fence, meeting police at roadblocks or Home Affairs officials roaming the border town of Musina and elsewhere, or being picked up by farmer ‘vigilante’ groups. It may also include beatings, robbery and rape from some of these authorities (Salopek 2007). In addition, there have been reports of abuses by South African officials, and the conditions in which detained, (allegedly) undocumented Zimbabweans are kept in Musina and elsewhere are often grim and have been denounced as such (Refugees International (RI) 2004; HRW 2006 and 2007). Despite this, most Zimbabweans told me that potential capture and maltreatment at the hands of South Africans is less of a concern than the situation that they confronted in Zimbabwe. The lack of paying jobs and the possible violence on the Zimbabwean side of the Limpopo are more pressing; so much so, that those Zimbabweans I met who had been deported quickly made their way back to South Africa, leading many South African officials to grumble about the ‘revolving door’ of the deportation system (Powell 2007).

**Working the border zone**

Some groups of Zimbabweans in South Africa have become more publicly marked than others, in part because of where they are located. For Zimbabweans living in northern Limpopo, those working on white farms are more visible in the media and policy discussions than, say, crossborder traders. According to interviews with SANDF officers, the traders are of much greater concern to security officials than the farm workers in terms
of their possible involvement in smuggling of goods (such as cigarettes and drugs). On the other hand, I learnt in 2005 that, for certain civic groups in Musina, both are of less concern than Zimbabweans living in government RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) houses (see also Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) 2006). The currency of ‘being Zimbabwean’ in South Africa thus gets publicly ‘transacted’ in terms of the particular livelihood or emplacement activities of Zimbabweans in the specific locales in which they are found, by those who comment, work on, or mobilise for or against those activities.

For Zimbabweans in northern Limpopo there are a number of modes of belonging operating in the border zone that are predicated on them taking advantage of and exploiting their murky legal status and, often, their own desperation. As widely reported (HRW 2006 and 2007), such modes are found particularly on the border zone commercial farms but also in other businesses in Musina and other towns, and in the former ‘homelands’ of Venda and Gazankulu. Among other things, the dominant mode of belonging on commercial farms differentiates the workers, helping to generate varied senses of belonging for these Zimbabweans.

Shifting senses of belonging came through in a conversation I had in June 2005 with a young Zimbabwean farm worker (whom I call Dumisani) in the compound of a South African commercial farm bordering the Limpopo River. Dumisani differentiated the types of Zimbabweans by the form of their incorporation on South African farms and ‘the particular aim of the person’. He told me how he had bought a second-hand car in Bulawayo, buying parts for it in Musina, and bringing them ‘through the [border] fence’ to a mechanic at the garage where currently it was located. He was planning to bring it down to Beit Bridge to have his sister’s son drive it as a taxi in this Zimbabwean border town, with petrol smuggled from South Africa where it was cheaper and more widely available. He added that he ‘really had to budget to afford it as I only earn R787 a month.’ He observed that there were only a few others like him ‘who use their rands to fund a project’ to make money back in Zimbabwe. Here, he drew a contrast with other Zimbabwean farm workers ‘who are keen to marry here [in South Africa] and stay in the compound during holidays – the boss can’t force you to go back to your family [in Zimbabwe] and create one’s life here in South Africa. Then there are those who are mainly supporting family back in Zimbabwe and go back as often as they can.’ The latter, according to Dumisani, don’t invest in ‘projects’, let alone invest themselves in their lives on the farm. Dumisani alluded to a fourth group who come to the farms but do not belong there, yet. When dozens of Zimbabweans arrive at the farm’s gates almost daily during the dry season looking for work, he remarked he and the other Zimbabweans working on the farm are ‘very strict’, tending to refuse them any hospitality if they are strangers as ‘many are hungry and they often resort to stealing food or money.’

All the Zimbabwean farm workers I met who came to South Africa after 2000 saw the need to find work there arising out of the drastic reduction of economic possibilities back in Zimbabwe. But what they did on the South African farms varied, as Dumisani observed, using any mode of belonging to acquire rands, food, some type of shelter and potential access to jobs and resources for a wider network based on family, kin, friends, and home areas. Generating livelihoods depended in part on their type of incorporation on the farms.

Some developed a sense of attachment to the farms as they had a (limited) degree of economic security and connections to the broader, dominant mode of belonging on the farm. They expressed a claim as workers working for a particular farmer, though such claims of belonging are necessarily always in terms of race and operate through asymmetrical relations of dependency (Du Toit 1993). However, these workers are also
inherently insecure on commercial farms. Consequently, taking a longer-term perspective, they started investing themselves into the farm’s mode of belonging, precarious as it may be. This applied mainly to permanent workers or consistently seasonally employed if not lower management workers, or a woman married to one. They complained to me about the conditions of work, but they were cautious about being too vocal in their criticisms as they saw their emplacement on these border farms as a necessary source of income. They had developed a sense of belonging, even though their wages were often only marginally better than other Zimbabweans, most of whom had no sense of belonging at all to the farm let alone to South Africa.

These ‘other Zimbabweans’ tended to be more seasonal workers, and were much more vocal about their working and living conditions. They were critical of the racialised hierarchies and what they saw as the indignities they were forced to endure within the mode of belonging on Afrikaner farms, while they tried to accumulate South African rands for their own and their dependants’ survival. Yet they also recognised that there were many, many other Zimbabweans ready to take their place if management deemed them replaceable.

Indeed, the massive displacement of Zimbabweans has helped fuel production growth for commercial farmers in the region. While South Africa’s neoliberal policies in agriculture prompted a growing capital concentration among South African farmers in general, Limpopo farmers bucked national trends by hiring more workers, particularly casual ones, as export production in citrus and tomatoes increased (Rutherford and Addison 2007, 622–4). This expansion of a few, predominantly white, farms coloured the criticisms against the Zimbabwean farm workers by South African commentators, accusing these workers of taking jobs from South Africans, or of criminal tendencies or general illegality (Salopek 2007; see also Nyamnjoh 2006). Commercial farmers have been the lynchpin of the practices and debates concerning the presence and employment of these Zimbabwean farm workers. The hegemonic ways through which white farmers are said to belong to post-apartheid South Africa strongly inform the responses of various commentators and interveners towards the Zimbabweans working on these farms. In turn, these debates have been predicated on the particular entanglement of the border zone farms with the state, not least on how sovereign power is defined and acted upon.

**Overlapping sovereignties in the border zone**

‘You [must] work for the [white] farmer! All you whites are united.’ Those words eventually caught my attention, drawing me away from my conversation with the farm worker Ezekiel and towards the middle-aged man who slurred them as he stumbled drunkenly nearby and glared at me. We were standing in a swept, sandy pathway in front of a long eight-roomed residential block in the workers’ compound of a large citrus farm on the South African side of the Limpopo River. This farm, like most in northern South Africa, is owned and operated by an Afrikaner man and his family. Both of these farm workers were Zimbabwean.

The intoxicated man continued haranguing me, suggesting that the white farmer told me to talk to Ezekiel as he was a (lower-level) ‘management worker’ – he was a clerk in the packshed and so he wouldn’t bad-mouth the white farmers. He stressed that all whites were bad; they oppress blacks, be they in South Africa, Zimbabwe, or Canada. We discussed this for a few minutes, during which he said he appreciated we were having a ‘civil disagreement’ as I talked to him ‘like a person’, not shouting at him ‘like whites do in South Africa and Zimbabwe’. He added that ‘when Mugabe chased away the whites,
Zimbabweans [marked here as black] were supportive.' He paused a moment before observing, ‘Ahh, that Mugabe isn’t thinking straight … He’s screwing over the country for all Zimbabweans! Look, I am starving while working hard here in South Africa and getting belittled by whites.’ ‘Why’, he concluded, mildly waving his finger at me before heading away with a friend, ‘do you collect these stories if you can’t do anything?’

His question implied a challenge. The working and living conditions for these workers, like most farm workers in southern Africa (let alone the world), are generally poor and extremely unappealing to those with middle-class or farming ambitions of their own. Moreover, conditions are typically that much worse for farm workers whose citizenship claims are held to be widely questionable by government authorities, if not by the wider population, as is the case for Zimbabweans and many other foreign African nationals in South Africa. While there may be some consensus amongst varied public commentators that the situation for Zimbabwean farm workers in South Africa is grim if not appalling, their oft proposed ‘solution’ of having the state enforce its laws to mitigate abuses related to labour conditions and deportation practices is not necessarily so straightforward (see HRW 2006 and 2007; Lincoln and Mairirike 2000; RI 2004; South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) 2003).

As elsewhere (Roitman 2004), the history of regulations and their implementation in this border zone suggest that the state and its laws and policies are often illegible or contested, and are dependent on white farmers and their entanglement in the practices of state agencies. This results in a volatile mix of security and insecurity for Zimbabwean farm workers. To a large extent, their experience of the specific mode of belonging on the farms depends on the politics of recognition of these white farmers and the particular symbolic currency of the latter in post-apartheid South Africa.

Those who end up working on the commercial farms near the border are subjected to two overlapping and at times competing forms of sovereign authority. The one all farm workers face daily is that of the farmer himself (who in body and in practice is typically masculine). As noted by the inebriated farm worker, this is also typically a racist sovereign authority in northern South Africa (Fraser 2008). Although most of these borderland farms were settled only in the first half of the twentieth century (Lahiff 2000), the farmers draw on the legal and moral authority that previous regimes—apartheid, colonial, the Transvaal state—gave to white farmers over their property and labourers (be they servants, labour tenants or slaves). Although never completely autonomous and under various forms of state sanction and law, racialised paternalistic rule was the norm then and continues to this day. As others have noted (Ewert and Du Toit 2005; Moseley 2007), post-apartheid farmers now face a range of new legislation and ethical market regulations covering aspects of their relations with workers. Such relations and associated practices had been outside the purview of state legislation in the past. Nevertheless contemporary farmers tend to comply selectively with these new regulations, subverting and dodging the various and often irregular enforcement mechanisms. While all farmers interviewed told me that they comply with the new laws (about which they typically complained) and, which they noted, do not distinguish between citizen and non-citizen workers, they made it clear that they and their management workers created and enforced their own rules relating to work and, for the most part, to life in the farm compounds.3

In 2004 and 2005, Zimbabwean workers told me about the range of wages they received, most of them being below the statutory minimum wage. They also noted the disregard for providing workers with protection against pesticides, the illegal deductions on their monthly pay cheques, the bribes of the rare labour or union official to appear, and the staged performances for the annual EUREPGAP (Euro-Retailer Produce Working Group
Good Agricultural Practices) inspections for exporters to Europe (Rutherford and Addison 2007). Describing these inspections to me, a worker observed, for example, that the farmer gets everyone to clean up the farm in advance to make it look very smart and spotless while everyone gets new uniforms [for the pack-sheds]. Then a white South African or two comes to do the [ethical] audit and talks with the farmer who shows him around for thirty minutes or so and this will be the audit of working conditions. No worker is spoken to. It is a bit of a farce.

Sometimes farm workers openly or covertly resist, but often they acquiesce as they do not want to jeopardise the source of foreign currency that is crucial for their own and often multiple dependents’ survival or livelihood. These effects of farmer sovereignty can be either reinforced or challenged by figures and practices upholding ‘national sovereignty’.

The best example of the reinforced imbrication of farmer sovereignty in national sovereignty is tied to what Lincoln and Maririke (2000) call a ‘special employment zone’ that previously existed for these farmers. Until the late 1990s, state officials had made exceptions for the farmers located between the Soutpansberg mountains and the Zimbabwean border by enabling them to hire Zimbabwean workers legally without going through normal state administrative channels for the issuing of work permits.

As export market opportunities increased for South African farmers after the end of apartheid, many farmers in the border area went into or expanded their citrus and vegetable production, which required more workers, particularly for seasonal harvesting. In the 1990s, borderland farmers were given special status by state authorities, unlike farmers elsewhere or other South African employers. For example, starting in 1996 there was an agreement for a designated border fence gate to be opened up on certain days in the week during picking season for Zimbabwean farm workers to cross. The workers would receive what were known as BI-17 permits of Ministerial exemption under Section 41 of the then Aliens Control Act (1991) from immigration officials on both sides of the crossing. This was conditional on the farm employer being registered with a farmers’ association (Crush and Tshitereke 2001, 57). Section 41 provided special dispensation to certain employers, particularly in the mining industry, to bypass the normal foreign labour recruitment machinery. Although the ANC government was reluctant to use this dispensation to assist the predominantly white farmers in the border zones (Crush and Tshitereke 2001, 57; Peberdy and Crush 1998, 33-4), it ended up continuing the long tradition of providing state assistance to white farmers for labour supply (Hugo 1988, 548ff.; Jeeves and Crush 1997).

The special dispensation to commercial farmers close to the Zimbabwe border was increasingly challenged in the late 1990s by media expose’s, politicians, academics, trade unions and NGOs who called upon ‘the state’ to stop honouring apartheid-era exemptions for white farmers (Rutherford and Addison 2007, 621). These critics demanded that ‘national sovereignty’ be enforced, particularly against what they viewed as an egregious continuation of the authority of white (Afrikaner) farmers in post-apartheid South Africa. This echoed a growing sentiment coalescing around sovereignty within the Department of Home Affairs (Harris 2001) while, inadvertently or purposely, feeding a theme of xenophobia increasingly expressed in media and the wider public spheres (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; McDonald, Zinyama, Gay et al. 1998). As one white game farmer complained to a journalist, ‘There have been terrible murders of farmers up here, and it’s 99% certain that it was Zim people who did it’ (quoted in Salopek 2007).

Today this so-called ‘special employment zone’ north of the Soutpansberg is officially terminated. A court case brought by some of the northern Limpopo borderland (white)
farmers’ associations in 2001, plus political pressure, delayed the enforcement of the rule against special exemptions until the new Immigration Act was passed in 2002 and its amendment in 2004. Now, ‘national laws’ are said to cover the area and farmers anywhere in South Africa can make a request to recruit Zimbabwean workers through a corporate permit if they can get Labour Department attestation that there are no South Africans who can do the job. Despite this attempt at legalising Zimbabwean farm workers as state-sanctioned migrant workers, by the middle of 2005 there were still relatively few farmers who went this route. Even for those who followed it, they depended on sympathetic Home Affairs officials, for the meanings of national sovereignty in regard to the Zimbabwean farm workers depends in part on how the white farmers themselves, and not least in this northern zone are recognised in national state discourses and practices.

**Shifting terms of recognition and protection**

South African authorities, activists, and commentators are often anxious about asserting control over ‘illegals’ entering the national territory, delineating who belongs and who does not. However, the particular assertions of sovereignty are also informed by how white Afrikaner farmers are situated in current formulations of citizenship, given their strong symbolic association with the apartheid regime. This in turn intersects with these farmers’ own projects of seeking to control their labour force.

On the one hand, a number of provincial government officials I met were open to assisting the white farmers, suggesting that, without Zimbabwean workers, productivity would decline and more Zimbabweans would starve or resort to crime. They also talked about the special efforts they made to work with Zimbabwean immigration officials to find some sort of official substitute for passports as most Zimbabweans are unable to get one due to expense and shortages of the materials to make them. They emphasised that they were carrying out longstanding practices of normalising immigrant labour for (white) farmers (Jeeves and Crush 1997). On the other hand, other government officials and many land and labour activists I met were adamant that the Zimbabweans should be deported, as their presence was helping to depress wages in the area, to take away jobs from South Africans, and to increase the profits of white farmers, while undermining land rights for South African farm dwellers. Moreover, promoting special labour practice in the area seemed implicitly to reinforce privileges for Afrikaners whose ‘significatory past’ aligns them with apartheid, and thus recognition of privileges for them is taken to be ‘threatening to sovereignty of [the ANC government’s] nation-building project’ (Pillay 2005, 71).

This mixed reaction was also apparent in responses to permits. It was common for farmers to give their own permits or, increasingly, corporate permits to Zimbabweans (HRW 2006, 35ff). These permits, whether farm-issued with no backing in law, or government-issued, were often sufficient to prevent deportation if the Zimbabwean was asked to show identification to soldiers, police, or Home Affairs officials in this particular border zone. This was in contrast, say, to farms near the Botswana border within Limpopo. Unlike the Soutpansberg zone, no special deals seemed to be forthcoming for white farmers there, as the following anecdote shows.

Alerted about a particularly dire situation by a provincial organiser for FAWU (Food and Agricultural Workers’ Union), the main trade union operating for Limpopo farm workers, I visited Zimbabweans working on a farm near Botswana in July 2005. These workers were living largely under plastic fertiliser bags strung between thin trees in a bush area quite a distance away from the fields of tomatoes and other vegetables grown on this large commercial farm. We had to be led there by the neighbouring white manager as the
workers were instructed by their white employer to flee whenever a strange vehicle or person entered the area. The significance of this instruction was borne out by their experience of almost nightly and occasionally daily raids by South African border patrol and police units trying to nab ‘illegals’.

The workers present during this week day we visited – mainly a group of women and men mostly wearing torn clothing – told us about the extremely low wages they were receiving, commonly R390 a month, half of the then statutory minimum wage for farm workers. They described a number of other harsh practices that they were enduring on this farm, such as long working days and very poor living conditions. This included having no toilets and drawing water from a dam which they said was full of pesticides and fertilisers, which the workers blamed for causing the rampant diarrhoea among them. They were also extremely insecure given the constant raids. This was made worse by the fact that the farmer had deducted R100 from their pay the previous month, putatively to pay for permits that would legalise their presence in South Africa, but that had yet to appear. These and other indignities led these workers to refuse to work any more. They were waiting for their pay, already a week late in coming, before deciding on their next moves. The workers said they had failed to find jobs on the farms in the Soutpansberg area and so had forced themselves to accept these even less appealing conditions to at least survive. This put in stark relief the border zone with Zimbabwe as being very much a zone of exception\(^7\) for Zimbabweans.

By contrast, Zimbabweans who have been working for some time on the farms north of the Soutpansberg were often confident enough that they would not be deported to travel outside the farm, occasionally even going into Musina. But new arrivals and those not yet working on the farms were often nervous about being caught by a patrol or an official they might encounter on the road or in town. They definitely did not feel secure in belonging on these farms. They were also vulnerable to farm raids, which could occur quite frequently in some farming areas. These raids themselves either reinforced the farmer’s authority or challenged it.

Farmers, officials, and workers told me that at times the raids were coordinated with the white farmer. In these cases, SANDF officers made arrangements with farmers, or as one commander overseeing border patrols put it, created a ‘mutual compact’. Among other things, this meant the officers agreeing not to pick up workers for deportation if they had documentary proof of their work status, including farmer-issued IDs, or simply if they were employed by the farmer regardless of their formal ‘legality’.\(^8\) During raids, the SANDF often relied on the farmer or a management worker, who could be Zimbabwean, to identify those Zimbabweans caught without documentation who actually worked on the farm. This gave the management workers the ability to ‘play God’, as one Zimbabwean foreman put it. Yet, farmers also complained to me that they often faced surprise raids when new officers came to lead the army platoon. As one told Human Rights Watch (2006, 36), ‘We work out a rapport with the police commander stationed in this area, then we get another baboon coming along and he says something else. They come and disturb our guys for three to four hours at night on the compound.’

Thus, the ‘sovereignty’ of the South African state can be either contingent on, or directly challenge, the authority of white farmers, helping to reinforce the ambivalent position of Zimbabwean farm workers concerning the laws and their own sense of (in)security. Indeed, working on white South African farms under such conditions can produce a sense of not-belonging, as experienced by these Zimbabweans in very visceral ways, and as evidenced by the inebriated Zimbabwean’s reaction to my research. It is an exhausting and tenuous process to try acquiring ‘value’ through an unequal, and often
harsh, mode of belonging, accompanied by ambiguous, localised forms of sovereign power. This is even more difficult when the legitimacy of such local sovereignty is itself questioned in terms of the borders of national belonging by those seeking to uphold national sovereignty.

Conclusion

The political economies of displacement associated with Zimbabwe’s prolonged crisis, and the interlacing between the mode of belonging on commercial farms and the ambiguous practices of sovereignty in this border zone, have generated the current situation for Zimbabwean farm workers in northern South Africa. Tens of thousands of Zimbabweans are following paths previously trekked by compatriots to white borderland farms in various eras. However, now they are doing so in extremely high numbers and under particularly vulnerable conditions. This is both underwriting a production burst for export agriculture in a neoliberal climate and creating competition among themselves and with South Africans (and those of other nationalities such as Mozambicans) to find and keep jobs. Some of the Zimbabweans on the farms have managed to create a certain sense of security if not a ‘sense of belonging’, and have used this to develop various economies of sustenance if not ‘projects’ back home.

Yet the majority fit uneasily into the particular mode of belonging on these farms as they seek out any form of monetary and symbolic currency. As one young Zimbabwean man told me in July 2005, after detailing the grim fact that he worked 30 days straight, 12 hours a day, without any break as a ‘field guard’, for the same wages received by those working regular hours: ‘I want to leave, but I don’t know if I can find another job in South Africa and I need to send money back to my wife and baby daughter in Zvishavane.’ This was an anxiety deepened by his inability to find out if his dependants themselves were displaced from their urban informal housing by Operation Murambatsvina. This was the government’s ‘remove trash’ campaign that had commenced six weeks previously, officially represented as an urban renewal programme directed at dismantling putatively ‘illegal’ housing and informal trading in the urban areas.9

The different actions and possibilities for these Zimbabweans in the South African border zone are framed within an enduring uncertainty of being ‘people out of place’ because of their nationality (Malkki 1995). This is worked through varied discursive practices promoting ‘sovereignty’ – a sovereignty very much hinged on the particular location of white farms in the sociopolitical geographies of post-apartheid South Africa. This is informed in turn by both public representations and by the particular effect of ‘the state’ on regulatory actions as well as on the production of ‘state’ or white ‘farmer’ divisions in the regulatory actions themselves. Some Zimbabweans such as Dumisani have settled themselves, uneasily, into the mode of belonging of these white border farms, and many others have resentfully subjected themselves to the farms’ largely unappealing if not appalling conditions, or seek to do so.

In this discussion, I have used the concept of currency to try to shed light on the emplacement of these particular Zimbabweans working on farms in the border zones of northern South Africa. I have examined how their nationality is transacted as a currency whose value is informed by its emplacement within localised modes of belonging such as on commercial farms (where employers often positively appraise it). In turn, their currency is affected by the mode of belonging of commercial farmers within South Africa itself (they are, at best, ambivalently positioned given the stain of the apartheid era). The currency of Zimbabwean-ness is similarly affected by the ambivalences and tensions of sovereignty, as
played out at and between localised and national scales, and most acutely played out in this particular international border zone. This currency gives Zimbabweans a certain cachet on the farms and in the wider mass-mediated nation, which influences the particular livelihood strategies and options for these men and women. It also gives shape to a particular form of anxious experience of displacement.

Finally, let me return to Dumisani, who in 2005 reflected on the farmer-issued permit he had. This was an identification document given to him by the farm owner that listed the farm’s name, his tenure of employment, and his Zimbabwean national registration number, and was adorned with his picture and fingerprint. This permit was not a corporate permit issued by the state but was nonetheless recognised at the time by soldiers, police, and government officials as granting him a currency of sorts in this zone of exception in northern South Africa. He posed the rhetorical question to me: ‘Doesn’t this [farm-issued] permit enable the abuses of me?’ Expanding on this, he continued,

if I complain about the working conditions to the Labour Office here in South Africa, they will ask for my [government-issued] ID and when I don’t have it they would phone the police who would come and deport me. The South African government allows us [Zimbabweans] to be here, but when we complain we get punished either by the farmer or the government. It’s just like a prison.

A few minutes later he decided to change the topic, observing, ‘I don’t want to criticise too much for I am from Zimbabwe and I am a guest here.’

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Notes

1. I thank Amanda Hammar for this point.
2. No Zimbabwean mentioned encountering any representatives of chiefly authorities in the borderland communal areas.
3. This did not include South African residents that had enforced claims under the Extension of Security of Tenure Act.
4. Game farmers tend to have few employees and are thus less reliant on Zimbabweans (though I met some whose small workforce were mostly, if not almost exclusively, Zimbabwean).
5. This court case amplified divisions among (white) farmers and their various farmers’ associations, of which the quotation from the white game farmer against Zimbabweans is an indication.
6. Many more farmers have subsequently received corporate permits for Zimbabwean farm workers (personal communication from Norma Kriger, and HRW 2007).
7. This term ‘zone of exception’ has a family resemblance to Giorgio Agamben’s concept of ‘state of exception’, which refers to the marginalisation of certain individuals, groups, and others from the political community by sovereign authority as a way to help constitute the political community itself (see Hansen and Stepputat 2005). Such ‘inclusive exclusion’ is fruitful in Agamben’s fecund theorisation of sovereignty (Agamben 1998), but I find the theorisation to be somewhat ahistorical and not too helpful in my analyses of the practices of sovereignty.
8. At the same time, workers and SANDF officers both told me that the latter no longer came in to deport workers when the farmer no longer needed their seasonal labour and before they were paid their final wages, as had happened in the past (Crush 2000a, 9).
9. This widely condemned programme resulted in the displacement of what the United Nations (2005) estimated to be over 700,000 people.
Note on contributor

Blair Rutherford is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. He has carried out extensive research on farm labour and land politics in Zimbabwe and South Africa and has published numerous articles and chapters as well as the book *Working on the margins: Black workers, white farmers in postcolonial Zimbabwe* (2001).

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