Brokerage economies: Crisis, cultural acts, and contested subjectivities at the Beitbridge border of South Africa and Zimbabwe

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Abstract: At the Beitbridge border between Zimbabwe and South Africa, the participation of state and non-state actors in the mediation of the border’s undocumented economy demonstrates the significance of the concept ‘brokerage’ in times of crisis and associated cross-border movement in Southern Africa as well as notions of space and subject formation. With reference to Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) production of space and Victor Turner’s (1969) analysis to interpret the ethnographic material on which this work is based, this paper discusses crisis, representation and subjectivity as both producing and produced by constantly shifting understandings of space, social action and configurations of meaning. This paper questions the role of state borders, undocumented movement, and cultural actors in the context of the on-going post-colonial African state and subject formation. In this way, the paper seeks to add to an already existing debate on the role of brokerage in transcending divergent, contradictory and competing frameworks, discourses and practices by utilizing insights from an important historical though relatively less studied ethnographic site.

Keywords: Crisis; undocumented movement; Beitbridge border; brokerage; representation; subjectivity

Introduction
Settings of significant socio-political upheaval, often accompanied by rapid economic decline, can and do create significant levels of documented and undocumented migration across international borders. The movement of undocumented migrants generates novel forms of interaction at international borders, where elements of state, market and patronage meet as different actors participate in the brokerage economies that emerge in conditions of disempowerment. In order to understand these forms of interaction, there is a need to focus on the ways in which the ensuing mediation of social relations impacts on conceptions of space and associated subject positions.

Over the past decade and a half, Zimbabwe’s economic decline has precipitated a significant increase in the numbers of people crossing its borders in search of economic opportunities within the Southern African region and beyond. Changing economic and social relations often mean that strategies of opportunism, accessible to a few, are used to manipulate prevailing structures to mediate or broker access to desperately sought-after sources of livelihood. James (2011) notes that brokerage in these circumstances, more than a mere use of state assets by some to provide means for those less able to gain it, is also the context in which social actors are produced by the social situations they help shape. By focusing on the Beitbridge border1 between Zimbabwe and South Africa, where the states’ infrastructure for controlling cross-border movement is increasingly contested, this paper considers the variety of practices that involve elements of brokerage in order to determine how social action shapes space and different subject positions.

1 The Beitbridge border between South Africa and Zimbabwe is referred to by the same name on both sides of the border. It should not be confused with Beitbridge town in Zimbabwe.
As a concept, brokerage has been used, especially within Political Anthropology, to analyze relationships of dependency and clientelism (Gluckman, 1955; Long, 1968; Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1980; Randeraad, 1998). Brokerage has also been viewed as inadequate in accounting for the strength of what others have called the ‘informal politics’ of bargaining and negotiation (Bayat, 1977; Chatterjee, 2004). This is especially the case among those who celebrated the triumph of the political power of states and other institutional domains in effecting structural controls, such as the entrenchment of property rights, that were seen to reduce the role of local relations (Mitchell, 1990). Other scholars have explored the connections between brokerage and the contexts within which it emerges (Boissevain, 1996), and the linkages that persist between corruption, patronage and continued poverty in parts of Africa (Mwenda and Tangri, 2005). This paper situates itself within a revival of interest that has driven a desire to explore the inner logics of brokerage so as to understand its nature and continued role and importance in social relations.

However, the scope of brokerage and mediation cannot be limited to the central figure of a ‘middle man’, with a more or less ambiguous identity, who acts as a go-between for ‘ordinary people’ and state bureaucrats, often embodying the concerns and characteristics of both by blending redistributive logics with individualistic ones (James, 2011). This paper seeks to focus on the ways in which the social relations nurtured through brokerage can help us to re-examine existing debates on the production of space and positions of subjectivity. The paper thus contributes to an analysis of the utility of brokerage, given the difficulties people face in finding a meaningful existence in post-colonial Africa. This is especially so in the context of disintegrating traditional frameworks and dehumanizing capitalist value systems, where state and market encroach on and disrupt marginal and rural value systems (Mitchell, 1990; Hausse, 1993; Lewis and Mosse, 2006; James, 2011).

In order to advance this discussion, I will begin with the following two observations recorded at the Beitbridge border post in December 2014 and February 2015. The observations, the subject of analysis for the later sections of the paper, document the activities of travelers as they cross the Beitbridge border between Zimbabwe and South Africa.

**Crossing the Beitbridge Border**

In December of 2014, I spent time in the towns of Beitbridge and Musina to observe people as they crossed the border between Zimbabwe and South Africa. The observation coincided with the increasing volume of people traveling through the border from both Zimbabwe and South Africa (Gluckman, 1940; Trollip, 2013). One December afternoon, the flow of travelers coming into Zimbabwe was the subject of observation. The exit gate where this observation began was the end of a long border crossing process that is often a harrowing experience for travelers. It was clear that many people within the Zimbabwe arrivals area were encumbered by the demands of long journeys from various parts of South Africa.

Directly under the overhead sun, this section of the border enclosure was the scene of intense activity. The limited cover that extended from the immigration clearance counters was shared between buses, private cars and the many bags being stripped bare for routine inspection. The surge in activity at the border was not surprising. The end-of-year holiday break in Southern Africa is a time generally characterized by congested travel. At this time, internal and international migrants embark on the annual ‘trek’ (journey) to their ‘traditional’ homes, one of the few annual opportunities they have to be with ‘faraway ones’ (friends and family). On this particular afternoon, it seemed that the need to

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2 Beitbridge is a town in Zimbabwe, situated at the border with South Africa.
3 Musina is a town in South Africa situated approximately 17 kilometers from the Beitbridge border.
4 The time immediately before Christmas witnesses perennial spikes in travelers passing through the border. Recent records place the highest number in a single day at 42,435 travelers on 23 December 2012. This number is much higher if the undocumented travelers passing through are taken into account (See Trollip, 2013).
5 Holiday-time travel across Southern Africa is yet another visible manifestation of the enduring group areas project that was designed to confine black Africans to economically unproductive labor reserves, from where they repeatedly traveled back and forth to work in the region’s industrial cores. Although more recent political and economic upheavals have meant that inequalities take on a more regional...
cross a border, and the delays involved, would be felt nowhere more than at the Beitbridge border post.

At the border gate, different individuals milled either purposely or aimlessly around the arrivals enclosure. Others pushed and shoved in bloated queues that snaked away into the sun. Sporadic scuffles broke out amongst impatient travelers; and private security guards constantly battled a disorganized and frantic press for passport stamping, which often seemed to overwhelm them. On one occasion, when a senior immigration officer appeared from inside the building to intervene in a scuffle between a security guard and an irate traveler, he found himself having to deal with a particularly ‘foul mouthed’, angry traveler.

A few steps back from the site of this commotion at the immigration counters, the ground rises suddenly into an often vacant, sparsely built ridge that falls away into an expanse of ground to make up the rest of the ‘Arrivals’ enclosure. On this day, the ridge too was a hive of activity. One queue led to an offset, standalone police counter, where returning travelers were paying fines for failing to produce valid travel documents. A mixture of travelers and hawkers in varying postures dotted the rest of the embankment.

On the other side of the ridge, an expanse of waiting vehicles could be seen in yet another massive and disorderly queue. It was unclear whether most of these vehicles were simply waiting, or if they were ‘holding’ (forming) a queue. In the middle of this mass stood a makeshift structure, covered in skew, worn green canvas sheeting. Some vehicle owners seemed eager to get their automobiles through this standalone gate, and thus swarmed several individuals in lime and orange bibs, who also held stamping devices in their hands. The men in bibs were customs officers. It was principally through them, the police, and immigration officials, that the official exit declaration and clearance could be gained in order for travelers to proceed beyond the border into Zimbabwe.

Commotion was only one characteristic of the exit perimeter. The other was a foreboding repose. In between those rushing back and forth lingered others who seemed in different stages of a prolonged wait. Despite all the urgency and the surge in numbers that suggested a rush to cross the border in time for Christmas, a great many people appeared to be ‘held back’ by the border. In an area designed to manage and facilitate movement, this general lethargy was very obvious. The seriousness of this blockage was large enough to constitute a crisis, yet the fact that it held steady, suggested that there was a hidden outlet to it.

Hawkers who formed part of the waiting crowd sold iced water (the heat was oppressive), pre-paid cell phone airtime, and changed money between South African Rand and United States dollars, among other things. They came and went. Most of them did not carry any identification documents, thereby ignoring a strict compliance order from the Zimbabwean Department of Immigration. They have been working as hawkers at the border for long enough to use their camaraderie with state officials to gain entry, and exit, with or without their identity documents. When passage through the front gate is difficult, for instance when ‘friends in uniform’ are not on duty, they sneak into the enclosure through several holes in the perimeter fence, a few hundred meters from the Limpopo riverbank. They simply pay those who patrol the perimeter fence iskofu (token money), for entry and exit. They also help ‘tout’ to facilitate an alternative exit for those travelers who are unwilling or unable to pay the fines imposed for their ‘undocumented’ status in South Africa.

On this particular afternoon, the processing of travel documents appeared to go at a steady pace. Travelers who were found to have minor documentation or immigration infractions were steadily di-
rected to join a queue meant to help them sort out their problems. One is, of course, not taking into account many others who found alternative solutions elsewhere. Nonetheless, those who waited around had something or other amiss in relation to their traveling statuses such as: no passport, an overstayed permit, undeclared goods, or goods in commercial quantities. The apparent efficiency that attended the document clearance process took place alongside a process of tariff evasion and gratitude negotiation between travelers and state officials. This played out through a mixture of stupendous bureaucratic red tape and different forms of 'greasing the wheel'\(^8\). Both travelers and state officials often seemed to be biding their time. They ordinarily do, eventually, find a third way to mediate between themselves by exploiting gaps in the fence and in the law. Thus, the wait was more than just milling or sitting around. It was a kind of 'moving while waiting'. It involved a process of indirectly engaging, by way of available proxies, with the blockage that delayed the exit every traveler so dearly sought. This was both hidden and obvious.

One only had to ask how to bypass or, as is often the case, pass through official travel requirements to begin to understand the complexities of the situation\(^9\). That many travelers pass through the border in the prescribed way is both the object and result of the state’s regulation of movement. But enforcement at the Beitbridge border post also aids non-state regulated passage. There are, on the one hand, a significant number of people without travel documents (Zimbabwean passports) and/or work or residence permits in South Africa, who are willing to pay for their safe passage at the border. On the other hand, few actors find participating in the economy of undocumented crossings resistible given the level of remuneration for state officials who man border crossings, the potential for extra earnings that facilitating this passage represents, as well as the precedence that exists for such practices. As effective participation in this economy requires a veneer of adherence to regulatory rules, it engenders both a reluctance to loosen the red tape (especially when it results in protracted delays and higher monetary yields) as well as its robust enforcement. This gives a perception of strict regulation while it also ensures that undocumented crossings yield good returns for the facilitators. In this way, both documented and undocumented crossings co-exist and are bound together through particular internal logics. It would take another border crossing I participated in to more fully appreciate the complex linkages between state prescribed and alternative border crossings.

On another day, in February 2015, I traveled from Bulawayo\(^10\) to Johannesburg\(^11\) with Zouma\(^12\), a private transporter (umalayitsha\(^13\)) whom I had (at that time) been shadowing for more than a year. He collected me at around 2:00 am. His choice of driving time is to ensure that he avoids the plethora of police roadblocks on the 360 kilometer stretch of road between Bulawayo and the Beitbridge border during daytime\(^14\). He also aims to arrive at the border by sunrise, when the number of travelers crossing into South Africa is likely to be at its lowest ebb. Ordinarily, Zouma drives back and forth between the two cities every week, covering approximately 1800 kilometers in the process. His weekly mileage increases substantially during holiday times, when more people seek his services. This means that he is often tired, and is always ready to take power naps along the road, despite the constant threat of robberies and/or attacks on the highway\(^15\).

Before we left Bulawayo, we picked up four more travelers including a mother and child. Only one of them had a complete set of traveling documents. The child had no traveling documents whatsoever. Although the child surprised Zouma, he nevertheless did not mind his/her paperless presence. Bunke

\(^{8}\) Avoiding roadblocks is another way of saving money; the police, whom Zouma called osceluncedo (‘beggars’), have effectively turned these into bribe collecting/informal tolling spots.

\(^{9}\) This is what I did myself, and my respondents were quite open about their answers, partly because, as I later realized, key questions were often received as a solicitation for similar help.

\(^{10}\) Bulawayo is Zimbabwe’s second largest city, situated approximately 321 kilometers from the Beitbridge border post.

\(^{11}\) Johannesburg is the largest city in South Africa, situated approximately 521 kilometers from the Beitbridge border post.

\(^{12}\) Not his real name.

\(^{13}\) Umalayitsha in the singular. Omalayitsha in the plural.

\(^{14}\) Others who have recorded experiences of exiting the border into Zimbabwe have come to the same conclusion. See, for instance, Trollip (2013) and Mills (2012).

\(^{15}\) See, for instance, Trollip (2013) and Mills (2012).
(2016) and Nshimbi and Moyo (2016) discuss the prioritization and strengthening of human trafficking legislation across the Southern African region. In this context, taking a passport-less child across the border is a serious crime that is vigorously policed at the border in order to prevent human trafficking. It was therefore a serious risk for Zouma, but the mother and child would yield him up to six times more money in charges when compared to a passport carrying individual traveler.

Our drive to the border was uneventful.

At Beitbridge town, Zouma stopped briefly at a petrol station\(^{16}\). It was not for refueling. He drove straight to the back of the petrol station and turned off the engine. After waiting for about ten minutes, Zouma instructed the two women in the back of his car, one carrying the toddler, to disembark. A man had appeared from among the crowd and presently stood next to the driver’s door, talking on his cell phone. He soon shoved it into his pocket and informed Zouma that he would only have to wait two hours for him and the two women on the South African side of the border. With that, Zouma drove with those of us remaining in the car to the border gate, leaving the two women and the child with the man at the petrol station. After fulfilling the crossing formalities – laced with much banter with state officials on both sides of the bridge – Zouma drove to the designated meeting point outside the South African exit gate. Once there, he turned off the engine and began his wait. This time, however, the wait was longer than the one at the petrol station on the Zimbabwean side of the border.

The man who had collected the two women and the child on the Zimbabwean side was one of the local ‘jackals’\(^{17}\) or izimpisi\(^{18}\) with whom Zouma works. The jackal had spoken to Zouma well in advance, and the two had agreed to meet each other at a petrol station in Beitbridge town. In this context, the jackal’s job is to help take undocumented travelers between Zimbabwe and South Africa. For a fee, he either passes over the bridge, paying off immigration and customs officers, as well as soldiers and police officers who man numerous checkpoints across the border gates. Or he avoids them altogether; braving the Limpopo River and its crocodiles, and choosing instead to negotiate with the border patrol, as well as amagumaguma\(^{19}\) – gangs who make a living by ambushing ‘border jumpers’ coming through undesignated crossing points in the bush. Although this is a dangerous option, it can be a cheaper one.

Around 1:00 pm and five hours into the wait on the South Africa side of the border, Zouma’s voice started to rise sharply over the phone. He had given the jackal enough money to avoid the bush, he shouted. And yet the women had just been chased back into Beitbridge town by soldiers in a foul mood. The jackal’s scheming had cost Zouma valuable time, the border crossing by his travelers had been botched and his own standing as a reputable transporter was being smeared. Dropping the call abruptly, he kicked at the air. He turned sharply and flung an empty fizzy drink can into the fence. With that he dropped rather heavily into his seat in the car and hurriedly drove off onto the highway, not only fuming with rage, but also laden with failure. He got his jackal on the phone and scolded him again for wasting his time. He demanded that he hand the iskofu back to the women so they could return to Bulawayo. He would take them across the border himself the following week.

He should have done it himself, Zouma raged on. He had only given the responsibility to the jackal because he himself was already carrying many people’s passports for stamping at the border\(^{20}\). Handling over the other responsibility to the jackal was Zouma’s way of managing the risk of unexpected arrest by spreading it out. None of this self-exoneration was enough for him to save face. Rumor had it that a huge roadblock had been mounted at the first weighbridge on the South African side of the border. The South African Police Service, Army, Immigration Unit, and National Traffic Police

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\(^{16}\) A petrol station refers to an establishment that sells petroleum and oils for motor vehicles.

\(^{17}\) In between taking people across the border, jackals often engage in other small-scale entrepreneurial activities in and around the Beitbridge border, including the sale of cell phone recharge vouchers, shoe mending and car washing.

\(^{18}\) Impisi is the singular. Izimpisi is the plural.

\(^{19}\) Gumaguma is the singular. Amagumaguma is the plural.

\(^{20}\) Since the 2014 amendments to the South African immigration legislation, Zimbabweans nearing the limit of their allotted visa days or who have overstayed their permits in South Africa are increasing by the day. Getting passports stamped for people at the border is a growing business for private transporters.
would be everywhere. Something was wrong. As it turned out, a few kilometers further along near Musina town, a large section of the highway had been cordoned off. Armed robbers had broken into a local bank branch earlier in the morning, shot dead one security guard and kidnapped the other\(^{21}\). As a result, security along the whole border zone had been heightened. Few people were taking any chances, not least state officials. As he settled into the long drive to Johannesburg, Zouma wondered whether this could explain why the soldiers had swooped on his jackal and the women, and had almost arrested them.

I suggest that one way in which to discuss the above observations is to view them as constituting the mediation of border crossings that takes place at the margins of the state (Hansen and Stepputat, 2001; Das and Poole, 2004; Sharma and Gupta, 2006). In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, productivity at the margins relates to fissures, or openings that emerge when the states’ infrastructural power does not match their regulatory capacity. In observing the governance of everyday economic activity in the Chad Basin, Roitman (2004) argues that a distinction should be made between the increasing intensity of unregulated activities and the dogged efficacy of African state infrastructure. A decrease in regulation does not mean that states are overrun or incapacitated in their ability to affect social control. The observations with which this paper begins portray the spaces that lie between the official enforcement procedures that spell out the regulation of border crossings at the Beitbridge border, and the actual practices that can be observed there on a daily basis. But they deal with more than that. Their significance lies in providing further insights into what we might call the ‘cultural acts’ (Barber, 1987) of border crossing. These consist of various individual practices that make movement possible and are contingent on loosely coherent institutional mechanisms and practices that in turn create improvised, though creative, interaction, negotiation and brokerage by actors situated within the plural economies of movement.

In order to further examine the everyday life of border crossings as captured in the observations at the Beitbridge border post, I utilize Lefebvre’s (1991) ideas of the social production of space and Turner’s (1969) analysis together with Mbembe and Roitman’s ‘regime of subjectivity’ (1995). The aim is to analyze everyday border crossings that occur at the intersection of space, everyday acts and social transformation in contemporary Southern Africa. Whereas there have been some scholarly interventions on the material significance of cross-border movement between Zimbabwe and South Africa (Nyoni, 2011; Thebe, 2011; Nyamunda, 2014), little has been said about either the social life of border crossings themselves, or their broader socio-cultural and symbolic significance. In this paper, I argue that border spaces are marginal zones where the creative tensions between the socio-political, economic, and cultural institutional frameworks and systems of meaning are uncovered. As people travel in a circular manner, crossing state borders, they are at the same time traversing the different institutional milieu and exploiting the gaps between them in search of basic sustenance for meaningful existence.

The spaces described above are characterized by vacillation, uncertainty and various kinds of potential that are the result of unstable representations that arise from contemporary cross-border movement. These in turn mirror a disconnect between the actual everyday practices of crossing the Beitbridge border and their significance and meanings (Mbembe and Roitman, 1995). The uncertainties and disconnections tend to shape people’s experiences both within and beyond what they imagine possible about their lives (Schutz, 1962), so as to suggest analysis of movement that pays attention to the dissonance alluded to above. Though the experiences described above exemplify challenges that accompany otherwise routine (but not predictable) border crossings, as zones where meaning resides in constantly changing configurations of experience (Turner, 1982); the gaps that often lie between experiences of border crossings and their meanings tend to render border spaces as spaces of ongoing reflexive transgressions of social structures (Mckenzie, 2001). In this way, it is possible to imagine the acts of crossing the Beitbridge border as cultural acts that are infused with both uncertainty and

\(^{21}\) The exact details of this incident vary. The kidnapping was Zouma’s version, gathered from the grapevine that morning. The incident itself made the news in Zimbabwe. See http://www.chronicle.co.zw/zim-woman-dies-in-sa-bank-heist/.
creative possibility which lie at the interstices of representations of space (Lefebvre, 1991) and their limits. Our understanding of border crossings is then enriched as they become processes that do not just take place within a particular “regime of subjectivity”, but also represent struggles for the re-appropriation of actors’ ability to live by their wits (La Hausse, 1993 in James, 2011: 321) as they hold together their lives in contexts of rapid social change.

The Social Production of Everyday Border Crossings

For Lefebvre (1991), social space is constituted through three congruent elements of social relations, namely; spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space or spaces of representation. Spatial practice is the way actors understand themselves and their surroundings as they negotiate their use; representations of space are symbols and ideas associated with institutional knowledge; and representational space pertains to qualitative, fluid, relational spaces that are produced and modified over time (Conlon, 2004). Generally speaking, the institutional ‘production’ of space is dominated by abstractions, where representations create a particular notion of space that dictates its structure or use, particularly as seen from a statist perspective. In this way, space is said to be de-corporealized, as representation has supplanted perception and practice (Stewart, 1995; Conlon, 2004). Representational space, however, suggests ongoing connections and struggles between practice and representation, and marks the key site for the production of the meaning (reality) of social phenomena. Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of representations helps in the analysis of the conflict and relationship between what actually happens and what ‘ought’ to happen in or to space.

My focus is on forms of everyday practices, or acts, primarily in their putative relation to the abstractions that make up representations of space. I argue that the apparent lack of consistencies in both practices within, and representations of, the Beitbridge border area problematize the dominance that ideology (power) tends to assume over space (knowledge) through forms of representation. Mamdani (1996) and Roitman (2004) suggest a mismatch between state power and its regulatory capacities in post-colonial sub-Saharan African states. I see this mismatch as playing out in on-going struggles through which particular state mechanisms meant to frame and govern border crossings are constantly being re-interpreted through practices as actors seek to re-appropriate their ability to produce the border space. A link and tension between this representation and the manner of interaction at the Beitbridge border can thus be established. The delay in the conveyance of travelers across the border suggests a level of sociality between travelers and state functionaries that goes beyond a mere glitch in the technology of statecraft designed to manage the movement of people. Within this space, different kinds of interaction and negotiation appear to unwittingly test and undermine the mechanisms designed to manage border crossings. In this way, but especially with the collusion of state functionaries in the negotiations for crossing, the border produces a kind of sociality beyond subject(ification) (Jansen, 2010) to and through state mechanisms. Let us now examine a number of these.

The queue where travelers were being fined for not having passports is a case in point. These travelers came through the border gate without the requisite documents and yet believed they would still be able to cross without too many obstacles, barring a fine or the need to negotiate with a state official, a broker, a facilitator or a fellow traveler. For them, the goal and logic that drives their circular movement is the same goal that guides how they do this movement. Crossing the border is possible because the border space according to the statist representation of it can be disciplined by the traveler and is therefore a contestable space. The infrastructure that governs mobility remains, but only in a quasi-emblematic sense (Coplan, 2012). The overlaps in practices that are partly detached from representations, but that sometimes undermine the mechanisms of border control, redefine the border space. It is safer to cross where one is protected by state security, even without documents. But the border gate is also a space of opportunity for different actors to achieve instrumental goals such as monetary gains, the ability to reach work and home in spite of legal requirements that they do not meet, or the pursuit of other economies of personhood. In this way, the border functions as always but
the purpose it serves appears to have always been varied. What it represents and what it affords actors can be the same or can differ, and can mutate from time to time, depending on specific circumstances. What the border represents is therefore in constant flux. Because states have the means to impose near-total control over movement, it is of significant interest to ask why enforcement does not follow a more or less consistent pattern. The later parts of this paper will explore this further. Here, I wish to demonstrate some of the struggles between representation and the practice of border crossing as seen through the lens of strategies of negotiation and confrontation, subjection and consent, coercion and resistance. These constitute struggles over the production of the very meaning of movement in general, and border crossings in particular.

In relation to the two scenes at the Beitbridge border, one can consider the two large queues (one for stamping passports and declaring goods, the other for the undocumented to pay their fines), and compare them with the confrontation between soldiers and ‘border jumpers’, and the passage of undocumented travelers (through various kinds of negotiation) over the bridge and through holes in the border’s perimeter fence. One senses from the above instances that, with or without documents, it can be a challenge to cross the border. Nevertheless, on balance, it is easier to cross undocumented through the gate than to cross at undesignated points along the border. This seems to overturn the logic of documented travel, with passports supposedly meaning to “certify us as persons worthy or unworthy of certain cross-border movement” (Jansen, 2010: 4). Here, the meaning of documented travel seems to constantly shift and change.

This, however, does not mean that the purpose of the passport is lost. For instance, when negotiations with soldiers for safe passage via the river break down, the threat of arrest and imprisonment that is implicit in the logic of carrying valid documents is activated. In this way, the passport does not offer a cover to negotiate undocumented border crossings; it is the foundation for it. For instance, the price one pays for undocumented crossings may be directly proportionate to the documentation indiscretion committed, but it may very well subsidize state salaries to civil servants. At a broader level, these representations also serve certain core interests of states in that they encourage a vigorous policing of the border, with or without intended outcomes. More serious breaches that are perceived as a threat to the integrity of the border regime may, for instance, be punished; while those that warrant smaller penalties may be ‘winked’ at for a reasonable personal fee. Such representations of the border offer a terrain in which to renegotiate, through different practices, the meanings of the border space.

**Waiting on the Move: The Social Drama of the Border**

The work of symbolic and cultural Anthropologist Turner (1969) has influenced our thinking around what has variously been referred to as the ‘borderlands’, ‘marginal’ or ‘liminal’ position in so-called ‘traditional’ and ‘post-industrial’ societies. He is known for his methodological and processual analysis that built on van Gennep’s (1960 [1908]) work on rites of passage, an allegory depicting a person’s movement through social corridors and across thresholds of social status. The importance of van Gennep’s (1960) typology was to demonstrate that as individuals cross any threshold, they momentarily find themselves in-between statuses, with no claim to any. This liminal phase, akin to the common notion of the state border, is where Turner (1969) has inspired a rich body of critique.

The interaction and relationships that develop in this temporary liminal state, according to Turner (1969), tend to exhibit intense awareness of shared experience, or communitas. Because of the severed attachment to various social statuses, Turner (1969) imagines this space as a kind of social equalizer, where everyone is more or less the same. The liminal position, or liminality, is however also a position of dynamism and of a kind of disorder (Turner, 1969), since there are no social hierarchies or allegiances to enforce a semblance of discipline. Communitas and liminality thus demonstrate a struggle between anti-structure and normal, hierarchical social positions. Liminars as the actors that occupy this position, possibly including present-day state officials, undocumented cross-border travelers and their brokers, possess the potential for a cultural critique or even a deconstruction (Weber, 1995) of structural constraints by traversing these spaces. However, even if they (and Turner) offer a
critique and re-interpretation of Douglas’ (1966) ritual uncleanness, their temporality and furtiveness can be seen as dialectically affirming the prevailing social order. Indeed, Turner’s (1969) analysis envisions a potential re-integration into a prevailing social order. Weber (1995: 530), referencing Rosaldo (1993), writes that Turner’s privileging of both a “homogeneous” communitas and a social order of “proved values” to which liminaries return makes for a problematic subject position, one that does not account for temporal and political factors, and one constrained by a palpable and rigid model of ritual analysis.

I contend here that Turner’s (1969) conception of the social drama that characterizes liminality, particularly the interaction and relationships of communitas, can be used to characterize marginal spaces (such as state borders) if extended to allow for the positional ambiguity and the socio-political contestation inherent in both cultural forms and their analysis. At one level, this removes the social leveling assumed to prevail in liminality (Weber, 1995). It is clear from the altercation between soldiers and undocumented migrants, between Zouma and his impisi, between customs clearance officials and motorists in and around the Beitbridge border, that power and subject positions are bound to change unexpectedly, casting doubt on the warmth and horizontal comradeship of these relations. These shifts partly reflect the social politics that constitute the struggle around representations of (il)legality at the border, at once contradictory and anarchic, and yet submitted to the border’s discipline or representations. The changing nature of relationships at the border then become a prime site in which to negotiate, leverage and broker cross-border movement.

In his nuanced study of what he calls “Zimbabwe’s new economy”, Jones (2010) explores people’s survival strategies under the accelerated social and economic difficulties of the past decade. As the ‘traditional’ formal sector of the economy gradually declines, new, instinctive forms of ‘make do’ survival strategies and economic action have become prominent and coalesce around a generalized culture of evasion, kukiya-kiya (Jones, 2010: 286-7). Social institutions and the law, as well as cultural norms and hierarchies, have not escaped the assault of a new logic of ‘cleverness’ and the exploitation of available resources with an instrumental eye on survival. From its former position at the margins of Zimbabwe’s urban consciousness, Jones (2010) argues that this new ‘culture’ has come to dominate everyday existence, resulting in a seismic shift in how people relate to the urban economy.

There are similarities between the small-scale economic-activity-cum-opportunity-seeking that characterizes the broader economy and the complex interactions found at the Beitbridge border. Strategies by travelers, brokers, facilitators and state officials, such as the exchange of money and negotiation of passage, mirror a similar make-do logic. Jones’ (2010) analysis adds nuance to previous studies of mine labor (van Onselen, 1976) and border crossings (Johnson, 1990) that have sought to trace practices that redefine institutional mechanisms and border praxis over the years. Both van Onselen (1976) and Johnson (1990) describe how travelers who cross into South Africa as economic migrants do so by adopting ingenious ways to escape the regulations imposed by states and employers. Whereas Jones’ study (2010) argues for a re-orientation of the economy in times of economic, political and social fragmentation, van Onselen (1976) and Johnson (1990) focus on the evasion of state regulative mechanisms in times of economic expansion in Southern Rhodesia (modern-day Zimbabwe) and the Union of South Africa (modern-day Republic of South Africa). However, in articulating socio-economic disempowerment, van Onselen (1976), Johnson (1990) and others pre-suppose a subject position that is politically emaciated, socio-culturally empty, whose narrative is subsumed within linear institutional and social contexts, and whose struggle merely constitutes strategies of deviance from, and disobedience to, associated institutional mechanisms.

It can be seen, however, that the social drama of everyday border crossings at the Beitbridge border reveals a far more complex positional and political picture. Not only do individual actors engage in practices that rely on and undermine state mechanisms at the same time, they do so within the particular cultural contexts that shape their social action. Their actions are influenced by and proceed within the tensions that characterize the margins of the political, cultural and economic. It is necessary at this
point to consider the broader multiple political economies of the Beitbridge border in order to locate the history that drives the border’s contested subjectivities.

The Border’s Plural Economies

The border between Zimbabwe and South Africa is an important socio-historical space. Successive Governments (on both sides of the border) have tried in different ways to control border crossings. The colonial Government in Southern Rhodesia began, although in a rudimentary way, to control cross-border movement as early as the 1900s (Murray, 1995), escalating surveillance of the border zone by 1929, after the construction of the Alfred Beit bridge across the Limpopo River (Trollip, 2013). In South Africa, the Union Government imposed a prohibition on the recruitment of labor from north of the 22 degrees latitude line for work both in the mines of the Witwatersrand and elsewhere in the South (Murray, 1995), due to concerns about the movement of unchecked labor from across the country’s northern border. Later, the surveillance of the border zone formed part of counter-insurgency measures utilized during struggles for political liberation in both countries. The construction and electrification of the border fence in 1986 (Musoni, 2012; Bolt, 2015) was indicative of both a continued concern about unregulated border crossings and the increased need for state intervention to stop the movement of African National Congress (ANC) cadres during the anti-Apartheid struggle. A surge in the numbers of crossings, documented or otherwise, continues despite attempts to tighten immigration controls in post-1994 South Africa (Crush, 2008). In effect there is an entrenched history and sociality of (undocumented) border crossings that appear to not merely predate, but also override state-based border control mechanisms. Through the enduring political economy of the local Venda and Shangaan people, narratives of erstwhile indigenous nations crisscrossing the Limpopo River in flight and in conquest, and the eventual emergence of state-led mechanisms to make the Limpopo River the official state boundary between Zimbabwe and South Africa, the control of movement across the border has had a dismal record. It is not just the violence, which has at times been partly epitomized by the constant presence of non-state actors who contest the control of official and bush crossing routes, an electrified border fence, as well as routine bodily violations of unfortunate wayfarers. It is also the fact that a raft of both state and non-state actors commonly participate (often collaboratively) in the conveyance of partially or totally undocumented people and goods across the border (Musoni, 2012). Any discussion of undocumented border crossings that excludes the active involvement of state actors on both sides is unlikely to fully grasp the political economy and the nuances of mobility and its governance at the Beitbridge border post.

The efforts to control movement are but one part of each states’ involvement in regulating border crossings. From an institutional point of view, the bulk of movement across the Limpopo River has partly been seen as driven by the ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ labor needs of the two countries (van Onselen, 1976), as well as Apartheid South Africa’s foreign policy (Bayart, Ellis and Hibou, 1999). However, in line with common global mobility trends in times of economic difficulties, the increased surveillance of movement across the Limpopo River has also succeeded in promoting undocumented crossings and international ‘smuggling and trafficking networks’, which the mining and manufacturing economy of the Witwatersrand has sustained and benefited from for a considerable period of time. A whole economy has grown and endured that thrives on enabling, facilitating and recruiting people who seek better opportunities by crossing the border into South Africa and beyond. The actors who participate in this economy span various institutional realms.

It is important to mention the states’ other role in movement and border crossing: the active participation of state actors in underhand (in the legal sense) international economic networks as part of

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22 The Witwatersrand is the area in South Africa within which a large portion of South Africa’s gold mines are located.
23 The Venda and Shangaan people are two ethnic groups whose members can be found in both Zimbabwe and South Africa.
24 This paradox of movement is not unique to the region, as it appears to be an almost ubiquitous technique of neo-liberal migration control, characterizing, for instance, the Aegean Sea as one of the most porous and heavily policed theaters of border crossing in Europe. For a detailed discussion of this, see Tsianos and Karakayali (2010).
state business or for private gain. Partly, this has to do with Apartheid South Africa’s incursions into the sub-region in pursuit of political outcomes through military means. But it also refers to the state’s active encouragement of an array of criminal gangs, the participation of security officials in cross-border criminal enterprises, as well as other ‘smuggling’ operations by state agents/officials in order to enhance state resources in the fight against the revolutionary forces of the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP), and in response to the state’s international economic isolation (Ellis, 1999). While cross-border ‘smuggling’ networks became a resource for the political economies of the region in the late colonial era (Ellis, 1999), they were built on, and then themselves nurtured, a culture of blurred boundaries between official duty and private enterprise on the one hand, and on the other hand ‘smuggling’ as state or private business and as a crime.

Ellis (1999) demonstrates the ways in which state officials tend to ‘wink’ at such a culture in the past, even if it occurs outside their ambit. In a similar vein, Bolt (2011) describes how a Zimbabwean farmer simply drove his vast array of mechanized agricultural equipment across the Limpopo River when, for political reasons, he decided that he was better off farming in South Africa.

My own research, and that of Ellis (1994) and others (Bolt, 2011) 25, suggests that cross-border movement of bulk goods and equipment continues in both directions across the Limpopo valley, and involves individual brokers with links to both states, state security officials, international underground economic enterprises, traditional leaders, criminals and other actors on both sides of the river.

The different actors who are implicated in everyday crossings are people who interact at different levels and according to different but interactive logics. In this way, we can consider their interaction as a platform for the analysis of the regime that governs mobility, which is more than just state-centered. Border praxis suggests that illicitness, if indeed it should be called that, is in fact part of any state (Abraham and van Schendel, 2005). From this perspective, a re-examination of mobility and its governance simply joins similar voices that call for a focus on micro-processes of movement in order to understand their role in shaping and critiquing broader trends (Burawoy, 1998).

Crisis, ‘Cultural Acts’ and Contested Subjectivities
The history of everyday border crossings between Zimbabwe and South Africa, and the plural economies through which they are structured and shaped, suggests that the forms of interaction highlighted in this paper are not new but predate the advent of international frontiers in the region (Manheru, 2015). This history also questions the idea that colonial settler economies in the region may have generally presided over a Torpey-esque states’ monopoly over legitimate means of movement (Bolt, 2012). While states have deployed their infrastructural and despotic powers (Ron, 2003) to control border crossings for over a century, with a questionable degree of success, there is very little to suggest that they lacked the material resources to wrest effective monopoly, or to significantly minimize undocumented border crossings (Minaar and Hough, 1996; Crush, 2000; Klaaren and Ramji, 2001; Oucho, 2006; Musoni, 2012). The challenge has largely been both economic and cultural, and points to still pending questions in the realm of citizenship and modes of belonging in colonial and post-colonial projects.

Many African states have struggled to transform the political, legal and geographical infrastructures of the extractive economies of the 19th century (Araia, 2006) into socially inclusive ones. At the heart of this (lack of) transformation lies the bifurcation of citizenship and modes of belonging as geographic and legal norms split between constitutional and customary law, civil and traditional society, rights and customs, town and country, and citizen and subject (Mamdani, 1996). Border crossings therefore, and the interactions at the present-day Beitbridge border, have emerged out of this fragmented and incomplete political project. Market pressures have exacerbated the unresolved crises of

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25 In this researcher’s case, a research participant who works as a manager at a local hotel in Beitbridge town, who is also a local resident and a former Zimbabwean army officer, drove about 80 kilometers due east of Beitbridge, to a spot where army personnel, amagumaguma and other wheelers and dealers broker and facilitate the transfer of various kinds of contraband and other bulk goods across the Limpopo River.
the political and cultural, seen in the fragmentation of these institutions in post-colonial Africa. The migrant workers who travel in circular fashion, with or without official documentation, do so less out of a socio-political attachment to states that the concept of citizenship, for instance, would imply. They follow a path of least institutional and political resistance, and their economic calculus brings to the fore the prevailing dualistic process of subject formation, one that uncovers their subject positions as citizens and as subjects in the (post) colonial sense. In times of economic crises, this detachment throws economic pursuits such as the ones described by Jones (2010) and those observed at the Beitbridge border towards marginal positions and reconstituted institutional spheres, where subject formation depends on forms of authority governed by other frameworks in addition to state and customary ones. What appears now as one consequence of post-independence de-racialization, rather than democratization (Neocosmos, 2006), is the manner in which issues of ‘legal’ cross-border movement have become a matter of conflict and accommodation that involve differing forms of authority as well as subject identities.

Dominant representations of the Beitbridge border space, predictably, do not assume this plurality. States struggle to project a unified vision of the governance of the border zone, one that may or may not be universally shared by state functionaries, travelers and other actors. By collapsing this plurality, dominant ideologies of the border space disorient both their own representation and people’s own sense of themselves within it. This is the particular moment that alienates practice from representation and action from its significance. For travelers, slipping in and out of legality is less a matter of subjecting themselves to the rituals of cross-border movement generated and governed by state apparatus, than one concerned with the search for livelihoods and the meaning attached to those livelihoods. It is these subjectivities that constantly mutate and from which other possibilities to reshape the border space and its actors emerge.

The way in which I have approached sociality at the Beitbridge border, and characterized the border’s social life, corresponds to Mbembe and Roitman’s concept of crisis (Mbembe and Roitman, 1995). With regards to the contemporary movement between Zimbabwe and South Africa, the chaotic nature of everyday border crossings is symptomatic of a broader crisis, perhaps immediately linked to the political and economic decline affecting Zimbabwe, and the resulting economic differentials with neighboring South Africa of which the movement is evidence.

At the experiential level, crisis manifests as both “a constitutive site of particular forms of subjectivity” that arises from a lack of coincidence between practices (facticity) and their meanings (ideality) (Mbembe and Roitman, 1995: 323). This is a crisis of representation. What the border procedure is expected to represent, and the ways in which both state officials and non-state actors use it to drive their everyday interaction is one characteristic of this disjuncture. As negotiating the crossing is itself never a clear-cut exercise, there is an added aspect of unpredictability in border crossings. As such, both state functionaries and other actors who ‘personalize the public’ (Medard, 1982) are never certain that they will not be caught or that their acts will achieve the desired outcomes. Everyone is, to some degree, looking over his or her shoulder. Cross-border movement is a manifestation of the hope and desire through which people seek to rise above their challenges to achieve and sustain life’s long-term goals. However, the particular forms of subjectivity and their representational crisis demonstrate that the uncertainties and unpredictability of the present barely lend themselves to any such long-term goals. Whatever people do thus necessarily depends on narrow subsistence horizons. The uncertainties, which signify the moment of crisis, make up the kinds of interaction currently observable at the Beitbridge border.

Crisis also involves the challenge to give meaning to such moments. Representations of the border space and the practices that take place within such spaces are in constant tension, and often result in a partial mistrust of one’s actions, intentions and plans. This ‘crisis of the subject’ is fostered within a general atmosphere that combines the economic and political uncertainty that characterizes migrant life. Uncertainty seeps across the border. The waiting, wheeling and dealing within the border passes, or the break-down of negotiations for undocumented passage, are both underlined by the ever pre-
sent and unpredictable threat that attends such public encounters with states; and re-orient the social life of border crossings towards not just the crisis of representation that characterizes them, but also the uncertainties around the kind of subject produced by this crisis. This results in a regime of subjectivity, “a shared ensemble of imaginary configurations of everyday life” characterized by:

The entanglement of a plurality of real and not wholly distinct formations; the combining and packaging of experiences lived by people at all levels of society; the physical and mental violence that issues from the lack of coincidence between the everyday practice of life and the corpus of significations or meanings available to explain and interpret what happens, to act efficaciously and, in so doing, attempt to overcome the specter of nothingness (Mbembe and Roitman, 1995: 324).

Conclusion
As Zouma joined the motorway to Johannesburg after his disappointments at the border, the rumored roadblock ahead did little to calm his fears about the stash of ‘ghost passports’ hiding somewhere under the dashboard of his small car. The source of his dread, despite having carried people’s passports countless times, was less the fact that he would not be able to explain himself to unknown officials; combined with the possibility that it could cost him large sums of money if he were actually caught. The problem was that the passports had, in fact, been officially stamped at the border, and being caught with them would have meant exposing a long chain of people to possible arrest and blacklisting, and in the process, put his business and other people’s livelihoods at risk. This episode brings to the fore the broader phenomenon of the border crossing rites that this paper has discussed.

In dealing with border practices as attempts to re-appropriate actors’ abilities to produce the border space, Bolt (2012) writes that in the face of the borderscape’s perennial uncertainty, characterized by mottled forms of surveillance, danger and fortune-seeking by both state and non-state actors, many seek to legitimize their presence by staying visible at the border, irrespective of their station, motives or documentation status. The phenomenon of posting their passports for stamping in absentia at the border is one way in which those crossing the border manage the uncertainty and precariousness of their livelihood seeking strategies by staying visible to the apparatus of the border. Their visibility, however, demands or proceeds through a manipulation in the visibility of the crossing process as demanded by state institutions. The careful way in which this ‘invisible visibility’ is negotiated relies on exploiting the liminal sites of the border and the law, undermining institutional control mechanisms and the representation of movement by states.

The need for, and success in, staying visible is nevertheless a re-affirmation of the same representations that they undermine, but which retain quasi-emblematic significance. As the economic decline of countries in the Southern African Development Community26 (SADC) has accelerated and cross-border movement has increased, so too the securitization of the border becomes more evident. However, securitization in this case does not translate into the effectiveness of security imperatives and actions, as suggested by Coplan’s (2012) observation that bureaucratic red tape is only matched by its active circumvention. It appears that the institutions of the state that guide the interaction between state functionaries and travelers (documented and undocumented) retain limited significance, in inverse proportion to the general sense of security and authority of the state (Coplan, 2012).

An analysis that allows for these dynamics is likely to also open marginal spaces as zones of political struggle over “who gets to re(tell) the story, and from which position” (Weber, 1995: 532). As a matter of course, these struggles spill over into the terrain of narrative and tend to contest the narrative mode itself. In this sense, the narrative acknowledges multiple identities of both subjects of analysis and analyzing subjects, thus allowing for self-reflexivity, and the ability to utilize a perspective that resists narrative incorporation, something that Turner’s symbology struggles with (Rosaldo,

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26 SADC is a 15-member State regional group established by the 1992 SADC Declaration and Treaty in Windhoek, Namibia. Member States include Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Malawi, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, Swaziland, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.
The lessons learned from such a perspective can add significantly to our studies of migration, politics, economy and society in the Southern African region. The regime of subjectivity as one that is rooted in crisis, which Mbembe and Roitman (1995) propose, helps contextualize the uncertainty and the dislocation of meaning from practices, disorienting the experience of border crossings. The ingenuity of actors in situating their practices and their subjectivities in this context poses new questions on novel forms of subject formation for the people involved in border crossings. As a kind of re-imagination of the narrative of Africa’s present and future (Gikandi, 2011), the practices and experiences outlined in this paper relate to the ways in which states and private actors engage in Southern Africa; and to forms of social collaboration that are not merely rooted in specific local geographies but that are also transcended by them. At the same time, the crises that define the subject position of the actors at the Beitbridge border engender new ways of relating to space, and of relating to the self. This has significant implications for the continuing evolution of the nation-state and conceptions of subjectivity in post-colonial African countries.

References


