

Zimbabwe's Migrants and South Africa's Border Farms : the Roots of Impermanence

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Grootplaas, a produce farm that specialises in citrus and numbers around 900 hectares in size, is the subject of Maxim Bolt's latest monograph, *Zimbabwe's Migrants and South Africa's Border Farms: The Roots of Impermanence*. However, Bolt's piece does not merely add to the other literature that concerns anthropological studies of farm and industrial workplace dynamics, but rather explores one of the key facets that distinguishes Grootplaas and its neighbouring operations from other farming complexes within South Africa, namely their position on the edge of the Limpopo River on the border territory between South Africa and Zimbabwe. Due in part to the deteriorating economic and political situation in Zimbabwe, and the belief that South Africa's Rand offers better prospects, the number of Zimbabwean migrants travelling south in search of work has increased dramatically over recent years. It is this increase, and how such migrants interact with white-owned farms such as Grootplaas, that is the chief focus of Bolt's work, a detailed and intriguing piece that switches between topics such as race, economics, and social hierarchies to produce a work with impressive breadth.

Separated into eight chapters and based upon both archival work and interviews with various farm personnel, ranging from fruit pickers, to foremen, office staff, and the farm owners and their families, Bolt has been able to demonstrate the sheer degree of complexity and interaction that exists in such settings. His work adds to other studies within recent years that have considered social dynamics in Zimbabwe's population, such as Rutherford's *Working on the Margins: Black Workers, White Farmers in Colonial Zimbabwe*, or Pilosof's *The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: Farmers' Voices from Zimbabwe*.⁽¹⁾ Work such as that produced by Bolt, Rutherford, or Pilosof is much needed as it helps to move the focus of study away from President Robert Mugabe and the political elite within the country, and to turn it instead to the wider population that has been largely ignored in previous decades.

It is the examination of this populace and the various interactions they have within Grootplaas that is one of the greatest strengths of Bolt's monograph. Through living on the farm himself, and serving as part of a fruit picking team during the annual harvest, the author has gained unprecedented access to communities that have previously been closed to academics. Primarily, Bolt has been able to demonstrate how sites such as

the Grootplaas farm serve as hubs of connections and relationships, granting its workers access to both a sense of greater security, identity, and further business opportunities. However, it is necessary to appreciate that such perceived benefits are by no means universally shared, varying considerably for each various group, be their difference ethnic, racial, economic, or social. What is meant by this is that while the farm benefits all of those who have access to it, the nature of these benefits differ considerably for each person.

For example, within the first chapter Bolt examines the experiences of the white farm owners and managerial staff. Framing their remarks and viewpoints through prisms such as the notion of 'pioneer stories', a retelling of the past that naturally lionises the role played by white settlers, Bolt is able to reveal how such white farmers are evidently undergoing a separation of views with regards to their role as farm owners, with this break seemingly a generational one. Koos, the retired owner of Grootplaas, is presented as retaining a clearly paternalistic view of his staff and role, with his history in the Rhodesian Bush War and other colonial endeavours likely informing this opinion. By contrast, his son, Willem, the current manager, is keen to present a perception of Grootplaas that does not emphasise this unpopular colonial tinge. For instance, Willem ensures that the first staff member Bolt met was Michael, a black office worker and therefore an indicator of how progressive the establishment was, even though Michael was, in truth, a rarity in a workforce that was still white-dominated. However, what is apparent within the white farm community is its uncertainty with regard to the future, and its need to diversify as a means of self-preservation. The possibility of coal being mined on the land, and the securing of additional property in Mozambique should future farming at Grootplaas become impossible, are just some of the precautions that have been considered by Koos and his family.

In comparison, within subsequent chapters Bolt details how similar themes are observed in the black farm personnel, both those that are migrants and also the 'mapermanent'; those staff that are fully employed all year round on the farm. In the wake of the Zimbabwean economic collapse, and the resulting scarcity of goods, the black farm staff demonstrated the same appreciation for the need to diversify as the white owners, although obviously not on the same scale. In addition to sending South African Rands home to their families in Zimbabwe, other goods were transported as well; soap, dry goods, and other commodities. These products could be consumed by the families themselves or sold on for profit. It would be curious to see how this system has developed, especially in the wake of the seemingly ever worsening situation in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, Bolt briefly touches upon the risk that sending such money and goods posed to the black farm personnel, resulting in the necessity for a trusted courier that would ensure such goods reached their destination. However, given the dramatic increase in mobile phone ownership across Africa within recent years, and how this has facilitated the gradual use of mobile banking, it would have been interesting to explore how this had resulted in greater ease for migrant workers, such as those at Grootplaas.

Fundamentally, it is apparent that numerous groups at the farm view their work at the site as vital to their livelihood, but that this employment is far from certain. Curiously, Bolt's work would appear to stress that the white farmers are relatively pragmatic as to whether they have a future on such farms. This is intriguing given the contention that has surrounded white ownership of land in South Africa and the fact that many of the border farmers originally come from Zimbabwe with the history of protracted land disputes that exist there. Furthermore, the same realistic appreciation of the tumultuous nature of land ownership is not as readily shown by the black personnel of the farm. The greater wealth and therefore possibilities that are available to the white owners ensures that there are different options available to them should Grootplaas fail; however, the greater restrictions imposed upon the black farm workers, even those of middle and upper positions, means that such a prospect is more daunting. This trepidation is especially apparent in the highest-ranked black personnel, namely the foremen; these are individuals that have not only invested considerable amounts of money into their homes at Grootplaas, but also command considerable societal influence as a result of their positions. The loss of employment at the farm would not only mean economic uncertainty, but also a severe drop in social standing. Justifiably, such a prospect is met with hostility, with one staff member noting with regards to the rumour of the farm being sold to a mining company:

[i]f this mining comes here they are bound to look for other places for us because we have been staying here for a long time and we will not go anywhere. This is our home; they must build houses for us. Where will we go?' (p. 210)

It is through such close analysis of individuals that Bolt is able to reveal greater trends within the border farm and migrant culture, another strength of his monograph. Of course there are inherent problems in extrapolating trends from such a small case study, but the comparison of the two employees that is offered by Bolt in chapter six is particularly intriguing. By presenting both Michael and Marula to the audience, one a modern and professional administrative worker, and the other a fatherly foreman who blends the supervisory role he possesses with the farm's wider society, Bolt is successfully able to discuss the competing themes of management and paternalism that are shaping African farming in the present. The examination is compelling and further draws out other competing themes that exist within the white community, such as how the retired Koos likes Marula, as he sees him as performing the role of a modern form of headman, and dislikes Michael because of his insistence on using English, which robs Koos of his identity, namely as a frontiersman who can speak indigenous languages. Curiously, it is revealed that Marula is fluent in Afrikaans, yet how those such as Koos regard this fact, and whether it is met with the same opposition as Michael's use of English, is not discussed. Furthermore, Michael represents a new and emerging group within migrant populations and farm dynamics, namely an individual with some degree of education. While he has been successful in securing an administrative job, this is not the norm. Moreover, those middle-class Zimbabweans who are forced to leave their native country due to falling wages and political oppression, are routinely forced to engage in work that is more physical than their previous employment. The way that these individuals function within work crews that they perceive as of a lower class or more boorish than their usual company is fascinating, as is how they attempt to maintain some degree of their former lives within the farm compound. Through his examination of these individuals, Bolt has been able to build upon previous historiography that has scrutinised the African middle class of Zimbabwe, for example, the work produced by Michael Oliver West.⁽²⁾ Bolt observes how these individuals within migrant communities such as those at Grootplaas will distance themselves from other workers, and will try and cultivate a perception of sophistication while scorning the others. Ultimately, the impression that is given of such a group, particularly when considered with regard to their limited prospects due to the necessity to establish good relations within the compound to progress, is one that is quite tragic.

In truth, while the scope of topics and intricate interrelationships that are discussed within this monograph are its greatest strengths, they are also something of a restriction. Simply put, the impressive breadth of matters that are discussed within the piece, while giving the reader a good understanding of Grootplaas, leaves them wishing that perhaps the examination had delved deeper in parts, with many of the topics considered in particular chapters being suitable for a monograph in their own right. Additionally, the third chapter that deals with mining endeavours of the area in the early 20th century, while deeply interesting and necessary to add depth to later arguments, isn't as intriguing as the sections that come from Bolt's own time on the farm. The author explains that he conducted numerous interviews during his research, with additional surveys being collected as well. Hence, while the work is a very welcome addition to the field of migrant culture and African social hierarchies, it is certainly hoped that further publications will emerge from this research.

In conclusion, this is a very strong monograph. Based on what it would seem from his extensive research, it would appear that Bolt will have considerable opportunities to take his readers back to Grootplaas in the future. This necessity for further examination is strengthened by the continual fluctuation in the situation in Zimbabwe, with the Mugabe regime in the last few months alone announcing how they plan to nationalise diamond mining within their territory, an action that will likely help to produce further flights of both skilled and unskilled migrants from the country. The production of additional studies by Bolt would be welcome, not only to expand upon the discussions that are developed within this work, but to further demonstrate how the migrant culture within this section of the African continent develops in the face of an ever shifting

geopolitical space.

Notes

1. Blair Rutherford, *Working on the Margins: Black Workers, White Farmers in Colonial Zimbabwe* (Chicago, IL, 2001); Rory Pilosof, *The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: Farmers' Voices from Zimbabwe* (Harare, 2012).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Michael Oliver West, *The Rise of an African Middle Class: Colonial Zimbabwe, 1898–1965* (Bloomington, IN, 2002).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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