Zimbabwe’s Migrants and South Africa’s Border Farms

The Roots of Impermanence

During the Zimbabwean crisis, millions crossed through the apartheid-era border fence, searching for ways to make ends meet. Maxim Bolt explores the lives of Zimbabwean migrant labourers, of settled black farm workers and their dependents, and of white farmers and managers, as they intersect on the border between Zimbabwe and South Africa. Focusing on one farm, the book investigates the role of a hub of wage labour in a place of crisis. A close ethnographic study, this book addresses the complex, shifting labour and life conditions in northern South Africa’s agricultural borderlands. Underlying these challenges are the Zimbabwean political and economic crisis of the 2000s and the intensified pressures on commercial agriculture in South Africa following liberalisation and post-apartheid land reform. But, amidst uncertainty, farmers and farm workers strive for stability. The farms on South Africa’s margins are centres of gravity, islands of residential labour in a sea of informal arrangements.

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Zimbabwe’s Migrants and South Africa’s Border Farms

The Roots of Impermanence

Maxim Bolt

University of Birmingham

International African Institute, London

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Acknowledgements

This book emerged from a PhD thesis, which I undertook at the London School of Economics. For help developing both the thesis and this book, I owe a lot of people a great deal of gratitude. The farming family of the estate I call Grootplaas allowed me to reside on their land for 17 months, and I owe them enormous thanks for their hospitality. I owe equal thanks to the farm workers and residents with whom I lived, for taking me in, looking after me untiringly, and assisting me with my research. In both cases, protecting their identities prevents me from mentioning them by name. For helping prepare for fieldwork by putting me in touch with farmers’ associations, thanks to Blair Rutherford, and thank you in turn to the officials of AgriLimpopo farmers’ association, Amanda James and Gert Rall, who helped me contact farmers. Thank you also to Jack Klaff and Brian Kalshoven for allowing me to use their photographs and archived material on Musina’s local history, and to Colbert Tshivhase for introducing me to different places around the former homeland of Venda, and for translating recorded interviews. I am deeply grateful to Fiona Nicholson, Fliss Ingham, and Sonia Rupcic for being there for me throughout my fieldwork, and to Fraser McNeill for the years of guidance and support, both in South Africa and in London. In London, Chenjerai Shire has been a wonderful teacher of ChiShona and a provocative interlocutor.

I would probably not have ended up where I did had it not been for Gavin Williams, my undergraduate tutor at St Peter’s College, Oxford. Although I did not know it yet when he taught me, his interests and perspectives have doubtless made their mark. At the London School of Economics, where I was generously supported by an Economic and Social Research Council Studentship (Award PTA-031-2005-00006), I benefited from being surrounded by an amazingly nurturing group of colleagues. They are too numerous to mention, but I would especially like to thank Laura Bear, Judith Bovensiepen, Tom Boylston, Vicky Boydell, Fenella Cannell, Alanna Cant, Sharad Chari, Ankur Datta, Amit Desai, Elizabeth Frantz, Chris Fuller, Ana Paola Gutierrez Garça, Carrie Heitmeyer, Michael Hoffmann, Elizabeth Hull, Malcolm James, Nicholas Martin, Aude Michelet, Martha Mundy, Michelle Obeid, Dave...
Acknowledgements

Robinson, Andrew Sanchez, Charles Stafford, Hans Steinmüller, George St Clair, Jason Sumich, Anna Tuckett, and Matt Wilde for helping me work through ideas and arguments, reading and commenting on my work, and even listening to trial runs of seminar papers. More generally, thank you to all members of the writing-up seminars in which I participated, for what was always insightful and positive engagement. Thanks to Yanina Hinrichsen, who took countless logistical problems on her own shoulders, and ensured that everything during my PhD was (relatively) smooth and painless. Charlotte Bruckermann, Thomas Grisaffi, Jason Hickel, Insa Koch, and Alpa Shah only joined the LSE after I had left, but long, wide-ranging discussions with all of them have been invaluable. Beyond the LSE, working with Jan-Bart Gewald and Paul Nugent at the AEGIS Summer School, as soon as I returned from fieldwork, was enormously helpful in setting me on the right path. Meanwhile, Amanda Hammar, Loren Landau, and JoAnn McGregor helped me work through ideas at an early stage of writing up, in the form of an article. Though always at different institutions, Zoe Groves and I have been in step with each other since our PhDs, and I hope our projects continue to intersect and produce great conversations and collaborations.

I developed the ideas in the thesis further during a postdoctoral fellowship at the British Museum, and most recently as a lecturer in the Department of African Studies and Anthropology at the University of Birmingham and a research associate at the Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the Witwatersand. All of these have been exciting intellectual environments. I really appreciate the months thrashing out the relative merits of economic anthropology and economic history with Leigh Gardner in our office alcove in the British Museum. At DASA in Birmingham, I have been very lucky to have such encouraging colleagues – Karin Barber, Stewart Brown, Reg Cline-Cole, Insa Nolte, Katrien Pype, Benedetta Rossi, Keith Shear, and Kate Skinner – while Sadiah Qureshi upstairs in History has taken me under her wing and looked out for my best interests. Spending time at WISER has given me the opportunity to push ideas in fresh directions – especially with Keith Breckenridge, as far as the arguments in this book are concerned.

I am, of course, particularly indebted to Deborah James, unfailingly understanding and meticulous, and Matthew Engelke, always an inspirational mentor. As PhD supervisors and later as colleagues, both have offered me a vast amount of support and constructive advice over the years. I am similarly grateful to my PhD examiners, Jane Guyer and Jonathan Parry, for their stimulating and encouraging guidance – again, extending beyond the PhD – and to Amanda Hammar and Blair Rutherford, for their careful reading of the book manuscript and their thought-provoking comments and suggestions. Thank you also to Stephanie Kitchen at the International African Institute, for taking me through the
Acknowledgements

whole process of preparing a book manuscript for publication, to Mike Kirkwood for copyediting, to Miles Irving for preparing the maps and illustrations, and to Ed Emery for preparing the index.

Finally, all of this has been made possible by the constant, loving encouragement of my parents, Neville and Lisa; my sister Olivia and her partner Matt; my grandmother Alexa; and a number of close friends outside the world of anthropology. Through this whole saga, my partner Jess has kept things in perspective, reading (almost) everything I have written, and even returning to my fieldsite with me after my PhD to catch up with friends and informants.

Needless to say, any errors or shortcomings are my own.

Earlier versions of Chapters 5 and 7 appeared as articles in the *Journal of Southern African Studies* (Bolt 2010) and *Africa* (Bolt 2012). An article in *Economy and Society* (Bolt 2013) drew on data presented in Chapters 2 and 4.
List of Key Characters

The Grootplaas Farming Family

Koos: founder of Grootplaas, now retired
Willem: Koos's son-in-law, who now runs Grootplaas
Jacques: Willem's son, who manages an estate up the road
Paul: Koos's son, who until recently helped Willem run Grootplaas

The White Border Farmers and Managers

Jan: Koos's neighbour, and farming partner in the 1980s
Thinus: one of three brothers on the border, and producer of tomatoes for ketchup
Jim: Thinus's partner in one of his land portions
Dirk: formerly a border farmer, who went bankrupt. Now Jan's manager
André: the Grootplaas production manager

The Grootplaas Workforce and Compound Residents

Michael: personnel manager
Holly: Michael's partner
Marula: foreman
Benjamin: storeman
Hardship, Ezekiel: members of Marula’s Lands Team and harvest-time supervisors
Norman: senior driver
Sarah: Norman's wife
Joyce: Norman's partner at the farm
Margaret: former teacher, and the wife of a security guard
Alex, Vusa, Simon, Tendai: young, educated Zimbabwean men working as pickers
George: educated Rastafarian, whose shop was destroyed in Murambatsvina, now a picker
List of Key Characters

Chipo: cigarette salesman and picker
Jameson: former teacher, with university education, now a picker
Jenny: Jameson’s wife
Daniel: tractor driver
Mai Jimmy: Daniel’s sister, a semi-permanent worker who runs a shebeen
Josiah: owner of a rival shebeen
Cornelius: taxi driver
Map 1. The Zimbabwean–South African border in the region.

Map 2. The Soutpansberg and Limpopo Valley. (Previously used names are given in brackets.)