



January 2002

A Brave New World: CBB Cape Town students find inspiration in a nation in flux

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Recommended Citation

Boyle, Gerry (2002) "A Brave New World: CBB Cape Town students find inspiration in a nation in flux," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 91 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol91/iss1/8>

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W. SOHA '99

A Brave New World

CBB Cape Town students find inspiration in a nation in flux

By Gerry Boyle '78 • Photos by Irvine Clements

You spend days interviewing, observing, scribbling in notebooks, holding up a tape recorder. Later you pore over notebooks and tapes, sift the wheat from the journalistic chaff, search for that one moment, that single situation, that pearl-like utterance that captures precisely the spirit of the subject, the place, the story.

If you're writing about Cape Town and the Colby-Bates-Bowdoin program based in the city, there are too many choices.

The lead could be Noah Lambie, a free-spirited Bowdoin junior, hustling around a new schoolyard basketball court in a crime-ridden Cape Town township where lay-ups are an enticement to keep kids out of gangs—and alive.

Or it could be Zelda Jansen, the program's resident director, navigating the narrow lanes of a colored township and saying that even 15 years ago she never dreamed that the apartheid government would fall. "We didn't even smell democracy," she said.

Or maybe Kristen Heim, a Colby junior who, when she first arrived in race-based Cape Town society, used her fingers to put quotes around the term "colored," commonly used in South Africa. "In my first host family, they said, 'After a couple of weeks the quotes will come off,'" Heim said. They did.

In Cape Town, contrasts and contradictions abound. It's a beautiful cosmopolitan city complete with a Ferrari dealership—and the abject poverty of sprawl-

ing squatter settlements. It carries with it still an abhorrent racist legacy, yet African-American students who have been to Cape Town talk of finding for the first time escape from the subtle racism of America.

Cape Town is a place where unquenchable optimism springs from the violence and poverty of the racially segregated townships like wildflowers after a forest fire. It's a city set like a jewel into a crown of roan-colored mountains that overlook white-sand beaches and turquoise seas; yet in the downtown, glue-sniffing beggar children sleep on the sidewalks like litters of puppies. When CBB students take to the townships for community service, they are venturing where many white South Africans have never set foot even once.

"There isn't any such thing as 'life in Cape Town,'" said Colby History Professor James Webb as he wound up his first semester at the CBB center last fall. "There's only life in Cape Town depending on the neighborhood you live in and the racial group you fall into."

Cape Town Encounters

Not all of the education in Cape Town is planned. Much of it comes in the form of unexpected and even serendipitous encounters like these selected from the reporter's notebook:

On a tour of Cape Point National Park.

George Kleyn's knowledge of the Cape Peninsula is encyclopedic. A retired high school teacher, he turns a tour of the area into a lesson in botany, geology, history, civics. The Cape Point National Park, he says, is home to hundreds of different species of heather. The mountains in the region are "a botanist's paradise." Yet for all of its vastness and diversity, numbers are also at the root of South Africa's problems, he says. Millions of people have come from the north and east to the Cape Town region, but there are few natural resources or industries to support them. Unlike the United States during its westward expansion, South Africa is hemmed in by oceans and poverty. "Where are people going to go?" he says, pausing from his recital of the Cape's attributes. "This is the Third World. It's not just us." →

Administered by Bowdoin (as the CBB London Center is by Colby and CBB Quito by Bates), the Cape Town program was conceived four years ago by a steering committee that included professors Randall Stakeman, a Bowdoin Africanist; Catherine Besteman, a Colby anthropologist; and Charles Nero, professor of rhetoric, from Bates.

South Africa, then just five years into its post-apartheid life, offered students an opportunity to witness history being made. The Nelson Mandela-inspired victory over the apartheid government handed the people of South Africa a country that was in some ways ravaged but in many ways a blank canvas. Still racially segregated today by custom and economics, if not by law, the country faces overwhelming problems, including its moribund economy, rampant AIDS and endemic unemployment. But still, it managed “the changeover,” as South Africans refer to the end of apartheid, without the civil unrest that has wracked Zimbabwe and other parts of the continent. Now, for the first time, South Africans of all races are deciding what sort of country they will create.

“It’s like seeing the United States right after the Constitution,” Stakeman said. “Everything in South Africa is in flux.”

Besteman, who was to spend second semester in Cape Town this year, sees the political struggle of the 1980s replaced by an identity struggle. “It’s kind of edgy that way,” she said. “Nobody knows quite where they fit.”

Since 1999, students from the three Maine colleges

have been folded into this swirling political and social mélange.

The Cape Town program differs from London and Quito CBB programs, all funded by an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant, in that it was expressly designed to give CBB students exposure to all levels of South African society and to emphasize community service. Students take courses taught by CBB faculty, who rotate in and out of the program, and at the nearby University of Cape Town. Community service is tied to grassroots organizations rather than foreign NGOs, and students collaborate with, rather than oversee, those they assist.

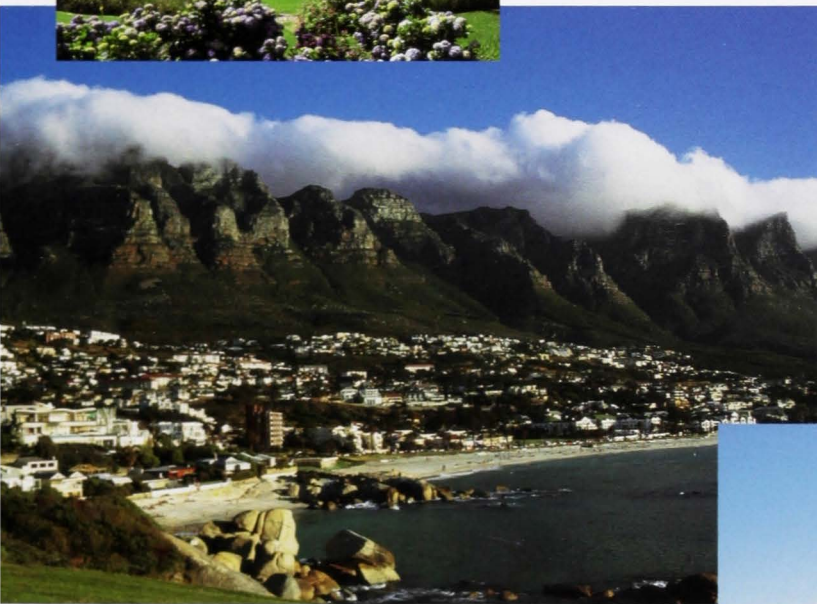
“We didn’t want our students to in any way feel that they were saviors or messiahs going in to cure the problems of the little people of the world,” Stakeman said. “We wanted them to get the idea that they were just temporary laborers in the same vineyards.”

Vineyards are an apt metaphor in a region where wine is big business. But the vineyards to which Stakeman refers are the teeming townships of the Cape Flats, the area designated for nonwhites in the days of apartheid government.

In Cape Town, coloreds (the term for mixed-race South Africans) and blacks were forced to live in designated areas south and east of the city. The world has heard of Soweto, outside Johannesburg, where anti-apartheid riots broke out in the 1980s; it may be less familiar with Cape Town townships like Langa, Lavender Hill, Khayalitsha and Guguletu. Nor does the world see the “informal settlements,” the euphemism for the squatter communities that spring up in post-apartheid Cape Town wherever there is flat ground on which to erect a shack of tin or pallets.

“It blew my mind to see that,” said Jana Richardson, a Bowdoin junior. “I’m from Maine. That’s one of the reasons I came [to Cape Town]. You don’t have this kind of poverty in Maine. It’s very humbling. It makes you thankful for every single thing you have.”

In the townships, by comparison, residents don’t have much. The townships are the size of cities with the feel of shabby campgrounds. Khayalitsha, with its dirt lanes and small cinderblock houses, is home to an estimated 1.3-million people, all colored. Langa, the most established black township, is home to 70,000 people, many of them middle class. Langa has spazas, or



Previous: exterior mosaic from Guga S’Thebe, the community center in Langa township. Top: the CBB Center in the Cape Town suburb of Newlands, where students take classes and congregate. Above: The Cape Peninsula from False Bay, south of Cape Town. The coastal city is surrounded by white-sand beaches that are flanked by mountains and ridges. Right: Hannah Arnold ’03 and Sarah Dean ’03 explain characteristics of marshland as part of an environmental science community service program at Zerilda Park School in Lavender Hill Township.



corner stores, an occasional restaurant. It is relatively safe, and in contrast to townships like Lavender Hill, where for a time last year CBB students could not do community service because gang wars made it dangerous for township students to stay after school.

Machine-gun toting gangs, drugs, rape: those are the headlines that emanate from places like Lavender Hill. Yet CBB students have found this community and others to be warm and welcoming and doing good works.

At Zerilda Park, a drab box-shaped school surrounded by security fences, CBB students last year made the acquaintance of an inspiring community activist named Raymond Engelbrecht. Engelbrecht grew up in Lavender Hill, excelled in school and sports and made it out. He had forged a successful career in insurance but a few years ago came back to the community where he grew up. "I received a calling," Engelbrecht said. CBB students did, too.

They arrived at Zerilda Park intending to help out at a daycare center. But several CBB students, all musicians, brought their guitars and drums to the school one afternoon and were greeted by a standing-room-only audience that included some very talented youngsters. And the CBB students had an idea.

"We sent out a letter, it made the rounds," said Ben Griffin, now a Colby senior. The letter asked parents and friends back in the U.S. for donations. Ultimately enough money was raised to buy guitars, drums, amps—equipment for a jazz combo—and to hire a music teacher.

As of last fall, the music program at Zerilda Park was going strong, the jazz riffs wafting across the playgrounds after school. "It's just a matter of knowing how you can make a difference," Griffin said, "and the kind of difference you can make."

Last semester alone, Heim and other students in Webb's AIDS course made a poignant documentary on Beautiful Gate, a township hospice for babies born HIV-positive. Rachel Meiklejohn,

Open-mike night in a small jazz club called Swingers, in Lansdowne Township in the Cape Flats.

The musicians include local luminaries and teenage admirers. Guitarists Errol Dyers and his brother, Alvin, perform to raucous applause and, after their set, the American visitor is invited over to the bar to meet them. Then the club owner, Joe Schaffers, says something unexpected, exposing an unanticipated rift in the Cape Town music world. "These musicians who say they were exiles from South Africa [before apartheid fell]," he says, leaning close and jabbing his finger at the air. "They were not exiled. They ran away." Schaffers then points to Errol Dyers and his bandmates. "I love these guys," he says. "These are the guys who stayed."

On the four-lane N2 highway between downtown Cape Town and Cape Town International Airport.

The expressway slices through the townships and a squatter settlement near Bonteheuwel where residents use carts pulled by ponies. It's a straight shot, and the Mercedeses and BMWs streak past vans and slower cars. On one taxi trip, a high-performance BMW flashes past the squatter shacks. "What do the poor think when they see someone in a car like that when they make so little money?" the driver, a man named Winston Adonis, is asked.

Winston, who is colored, says the Mercedeses and BMWs show what is possible in the new South Africa. "I believe there is no situation so difficult that you can't get out of it," he says. "It's the wanting."

Inside "South Africa's Smallest Hotel."

Vicky's Bed and Breakfast is in Khayalitsha, a sprawling township that is home to 1.3-million people. It's a poor place, dirt lanes and cinderblock houses, but there is a new industry here: tourism. Europeans and other foreigners ride through in vans and buses as guides recite the bleak history of apartheid South Africa. Then the vans stop, and camera-toting tourists, most of them white, troop into shebeens, spazas [stores]—and Vicky Ntozini's little bed and breakfast.

She is an energetic, avowed entrepreneur who endured patronization and ridicule as she got her business off the ground. Now the comfortable little house with two small rooms is doing a booming trade. "We had CNN in here. We had the BBC. You name it," Ntozini says. "Thanks to a tourist from America, we have a Web site (journey.digitalspace.net/vicky.html)."

On Robben Island.

Macy Lubalo and Nhi Nhi Malgas say they work at the NY1/Clinic in Guguletu, a township. They do HIV testing, they say, the results running four out of five positive. "Every weekend we bury people who die of AIDS," Malgas says matter-of-factly. Lubalo nods in agreement. "Every week," she says, "one that you know."

a Colby junior, worked with a group of Langa high school students as they prepared for their matriculation exams, the test that would determine their future education paths and careers. "I think I've learned more from them than they've learned from me," Meiklejohn said.

Students of Julie McGee, a Bowdoin professor of art, last semester organized and promoted a first-ever art show in the township. It was called "Homecoming" and was devoted to the work of artists living in the townships. Students interviewed each artist, some through Khosa-speaking translators, and wrote their biographies in English. For students and McGee, it was an opportunity to shine a light on artists whose work has been long hidden in shadows of poverty.

"That's the great part about being here . . . people are so thankful just to have someone say, 'I believe in you. I'm interested. Tell me about your work,'" McGee said in her Cape Town office where paintings were stored prior to the exhibit. "Because there's not enough of that for black artists here."

Students entered artists' homes interested and often emerged inspired. These after all are painters and sculptors who produce art under the most difficult circumstances, sometimes choosing colors based on their cost, but refusing to consider art a luxury.

"They say that it's a gift they've been given and they must use it," said Colby's Heather Finn '03, who spent time with painter Alfred Budaza at his home studio in Philippi East. "It's almost spiritual."

Yet because few township residents can afford to buy art, the artists' works have been whisked away to white buyers in the city. One township native and artist, Vuyile Cameron Voyiya, now employed by the South African National Gallery, said the CBB effort—with buyers entering the townships from the white art world—gave the artists credibility in the eyes of their township

Living Color

When Leroy Gaines, an African-American student at Bowdoin, decided to spend a semester at the CBB Cape Town Center, he expected that he and black South Africans would have race as common ground.

Gaines, an Africana studies major from Holyoke, Mass., was mistaken.

"Coming from America and having this understanding of black people and global unity, I thought I would go there and we would be like, 'Hey, my brothers!' What happened is that we were not the same. You can't just assume that because you have the same color skin you have the same cultural traits."

That realization was one of many.

American students of color anticipate their Cape Town semester with excitement and some trepidation, wondering what it will be like to live in a society that was until a decade ago fundamentally and officially racist. They find themselves in a world where race still is precisely delineated and a primary defining characteristic.

Steve Jaboin, a Colby senior and a Haitian American, arrived in Cape Town last year and knew immediately that he was in a different world. "My host family asked me what I was," he said. "I was, like, 'What?' I thought, 'Wow.'"

Jaboin, who said he sometimes felt he had taken a time machine back to the 1950s, said the experience made him more fully realize how far America has come. In South Africa people to a large degree still are segregated by race in housing and economic and educational opportunities. Yet Jaboin and Gaines both felt an unexpected relief being in a country where race was frankly discussed and where blacks and coloreds, the label affixed to people of Malay and other descents, make up the vast majority.

"I figured race would be something that was on my mind all the time," Gaines said back at Bowdoin. "But being in South Africa, that was the first time I was in a community where black people were the majority. They were the politicians, the police officers. So in a way when I was there I felt my blackness wasn't so pronounced as it is here, particularly being in Maine. When I was there I was able to just walk around and not think about race all the time."

What both men felt was a respite from what they called the subtle racism of American society. Jaboin said he met some South Africans who were rude by American mores, but he still felt there was something refreshing about their honesty. In South Africa, he said, "race hasn't gone underground."

Like all CBB students, he lived with host families from different backgrounds and felt his identity change as he moved from world to world. Crossing the border to Namibia with a Haitian passport, he was confronted by border guards who had never heard of Haiti and were sure he was Kenyan. Living with a white host parent, he attended a church function in an affluent white suburb and introduced himself as the woman's son—and watched the eyebrows raise. "My identity was never the same two days in a row," Jaboin said.

Yet the openness with which South Africans confront race as they rebuild their society was refreshing, he said. "South Africa was honest," Jaboin said. "They haven't acquired the euphemisms of the 'isms.'"

neighbors. In the past "it didn't seem to be a responsible job," Voyiya said. "[Residents] may feel artists are just playing around."

But the show did more than just bring the outside art world to Langa. It also crossed township lines, drawn just as deeply during apartheid as the line between white and non-white. Habit, race, economics and lack of transportation meant residents of Lavender Hill who attended the exhibit opening because of their involvement with the CBB center had never been to Langa. The Americans hop—and sometimes blunder—across cultural divides.

"We haven't grown up here knowing that we can't," said Webb, who is white and sometimes found himself describing the townships to whites, lifelong South Africans who had never ventured there. "So we do it. And a lot of that is naïve. That doesn't mean it isn't successful."

Nor does it mean the program sends students blithely into dangerous situations. In fact, one of the biggest expenses is the cost of a taxi service called SafeCab. The company operates a fleet of Kombis, Volkswagen vans, that shuttle students to and from the townships, to and from host families' homes and downtown to pick up students who go out to Cape Town's plentiful restaurants and bars.

In fact, the CBB students are kept on what they say is a pretty tight leash. They're issued cell phones and told to keep the center and host families apprised of their whereabouts, and the rigorous academic demands keep them at the CBB center or the University of Cape Town much of the week. Last semester, some students complained about the workload, saying they wanted more time to explore Cape Town and South Africa.

Stakeman, noting that he grew up in New York City, says he doesn't find Cape Town especially dangerous for a large city. He maintains that many parental concerns come from misconceptions about South Africa and the African continent in general. Indeed, for parents whose image of South Africa may date to the Soweto riots, the country may seem a threatening place.

"I can't tell you how many parents I've spoken to about that," Stakeman said. "If they're speaking to me they want to be reassured. . . . But they're only the tip of the iceberg. There may be people who are saying, 'No way is my child going to that program.'"

In fact, several students said that when they broached the idea of going to Cape Town to their parents, the reaction was, "Why can't you just go to London?" One student said her father drew up a list of what she could and couldn't do in South Africa.

There is crime in the city, especially in the townships. Students don't wander the townships at night, or alone during the day. When they are in the townships, they're accompanied by friends who live there or are dropped at a community-service destination. A tour taken by students includes a stop at the cross erected in Guguletu in memory of Amy Biehl, the American woman murdered by an anti-apartheid mob in 1993.

Biehl's family publicly forgave her killers, and CBB Cape Town students, staff and faculty focus not on the violence that mars post-apartheid South Africa but on the optimism that springs up in spite of it. Claire Cuno, a Bates junior, points out that Beautiful Gate, the hospice for children with AIDS, is a sad place, but she describes the devotion of those who work there as "humbling." Brendan Ferriter, a Bates junior who also worked at Beautiful



Above: artists Vuyile Cameron Voyiya, left, and Lundi Mduba at Homecoming, a first-ever art exhibit held in Langa township in Cape Town with the assistance of CBB Cape Town students and Bowdoin professor Julie McGee. Right: Chris Reigeluth '03 and Kristen Heim '03, are shown with high school students they worked with in Langa. At left is Eric Dilima, who works as a liaison between the CBB program and the township schools.



Gate, talked about the “positive aura” there. “I feel a lot of love and caring in the place,” Ferriter said.

Not that the CBB program produces political Pollyannas. Webb’s course on AIDS in South Africa (which included a panel discussion by national experts, including the country’s minister of health) took a hard look at the reality of the situation, especially the fallback shift from prevention to treatment. Besteman points to the frustration of black South Africans, who thought the political struggle of the 1980s would bring relief from crushing poverty. “There’s a sense that apartheid ended and white people got to keep everything,” she said.

Yes, the economic problems facing the country are overwhelming. AIDS looms like an ever-present Grim Reaper. Improvements in housing and sanitation don’t keep pace with mounting unemployment and the declining South African currency, the rand.

“And then there are these incredible people like Raymond [Engelbrecht, in Lavender Hill] who are dedicating their lives toward trying to change circumstances in their communities,” Webb said. “It’s a phenomenal place.”

CBB students and faculty alike describe Cape Town and South Africa as emotionally uplifting and naturally beautiful. Students chafe under security constraints, with some renting cars and traveling to Namibia, Botswana, even Zanzibar. Last semester several students bought surfboards and took to the waves. And many students, like Colby senior Steve Jaboin, made fast friends of host families. “It was really fabulous. They go camping, canoeing. Everything was an adventure. I was their child,” he said.

A Haitian American, Jaboin accompanied his colored host

family on outings, to parties. During a stint with a conservative white host family whose sons were into hip-hop music, he heard his host mother remark upon seeing a white man panhandling: “For someone to be white and poor, they must have really tried to fail.”

To an American, that’s jarring. To a South African, that’s simply true.

Jaboin worked in the basketball program in Lavender Hill and felt both fulfilled and an impostor, he said. “I never volunteered before,” he admitted. “The program has made me think a lot about the idea of community service. It started me thinking a lot about my relationship to the world.”

That, of course, is the idea, not only of CBB Cape Town but of a liberal arts education—to distort what had been your world view. To shake your foundations and make you reconsider your beliefs.

In CBB Cape Town there’s a whole lot of shaking going on. What is this place with a brutal past and a heroic leader? How can

so many criminals and saints live side by side? With all of its problems, how can one of South Africa’s most distinguishing characteristics be optimism? Why don’t the impoverished masses rise up and smash the Ferrari dealership? How many township children have never been to the beach? Why are we so fortunate in this country? In the age of CNN and worldwide coverage, why don’t we know more about it?

“A lot of the students felt more confused at the end of the program than at the beginning,” Besteman said. “They came home with more questions to reflect on, more open-mindedness about confronting problems in their own country.” ●

South Africa Diary

Colby, Bates and Bowdoin students at the CBB Cape Town Center share their thoughts and experiences in an online journal. On November 16, Dana Kramer, Bowdoin '03, posted this dispatch as she prepared to leave South Africa. The rest of Kramer’s entry, and others, can be found online at www.colby.edu/colby.mag/issues/win02/capetown/.

I can't even imagine how going home to New York is going to feel. Unreal, uncomfortable, and it might take a while to regain equilibrium, re-adjust to the right side of the road, mother's cooking (to which I must add, booray), communicating only with Americans, returning to what might be a very different place than the America I left, where I'll be surrounded by whatever patriotic zeal my countrypersons have recently come down with; also, having to give brief accounts of my experience here over and over again, which I'll be glad to share, but which I cannot imagine summing up well over one cup of coffee or to one of my parents' friends in passing. It has been shocking and wonderful, and has affected me in ways I would not even know how to describe.