

Beyond your Borders

University of Oregon 2004-2005

The Bruce Files: Living with a Xhosa Lion

By: Oliver Hogan

Bruce Ntushansa stands no taller than five-foot seven inches and has a creamy, peanut butter-brown complexion. Because his brown hair grows curly and his skin color is much lighter than that of men considered "black," Bruce could have passed for "Colored" during the Apartheid era—the race between white and black on the Afrikaner paradigm of racial order.

Bruce is a student at the University of Cape Town and was my

I thought Bruce avoided me because my skin is white. For several weeks, he made no effort to acknowledge me in our apartment and would always speak Xhosa in my presence, unless addressing me out of necessity. We would walk past each other without exchanging even a few quick words, completely avoiding the ostensibly casual, yet clearly forced conversations that produce long awkward pauses, fidgeting and staring at shoes.

The door to his room was always closed, and I made sure to close mine to muffle the continuous stream

I cannot remember the exact moment we started enjoying each other's company; there was no specific event marking an improvement in our relations, but rather a series

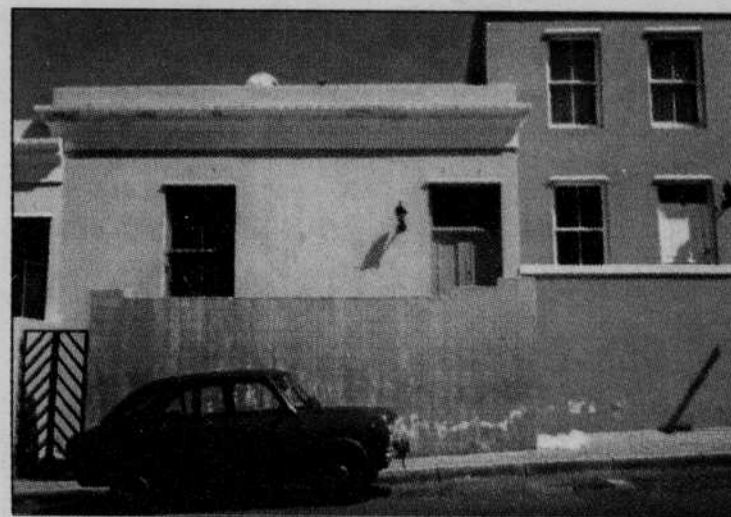
of subtleties leading to a gradual relaxation of tensions. I would make a favorable comment about the aromas produced from the kitchen area. He would compliment an article of my clothing or a culinary dish of my own. We were taking baby steps in a friendlier direction. I began to really like Bruce when I realized that, when he passed me a small compliment, he meant what he was saying. I felt compelled to respond to his sincerity by improving my listening skills.

During our discussions, Bruce would occasionally share his highly personal memories of Apartheid, like the time his mother, pregnant with his younger brother, was beaten by police

when she tried to visit her husband at work in Stellenbosch, a town the Apartheid government ruled off limits to non-white women. Bruce was waiting for an audience to share his stories—all I had to do was start listening.

Language greatly strengthened our friendship. Xhosa is Bruce's first language, and for those who have never heard of it, the language incorporates three distinct clicks into its lexicon. Trying to mimic the various clicks that are so foreign to an English speaker's palatal movements produces great frustration; I spent several hours attempting to master the 'Xh' click, a sound produced by

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Colored houses line the streets of Capetown

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roommate while I studied there. Over a four-month period, I found that the Xhosa lion actually has many ticklish spots.

At first, our interactions were cautious and guarded. There was a period of feeling each other out, trying to understand each other's habits and respect each other's needs. Several months passed before we held a conversation that lasted longer than a few minutes. We had nothing in common.

of qwaito (a blend of hip-hop and African styles) that he was so fond of playing. I hated the driving sound of qwaito in those first few months, especially when the pulsating beats disrupted my reading, in particular about South African culture.

It is ironic that I initially chose to avoid my South African roommate—the very personification of culture—opting instead to learn about culture from inanimate university texts. I was blind, ignorant and cautious.

No Usa Gringo Logic: Learning How to Survive in Mexico

By: Jane Wong

My Mexican civilizations professor in Querétaro used the expression, "No usa gringo logic" to our class of about 16 gringos from Oregon, Mississippi, Colorado and Arizona. Initially, she employed this expression to explain the tumultuous Mexican history of the last few centuries.

However, this expression in

"Spanglish" could also be applied to many frustrating, perplexing and downright unexplainable situations that we Americans encountered in our four months in Mexico. The message, of course, was to keep an open mind because there certainly existed the temptation to question what we saw and to pass judgment prematurely.

"Choque cultural" (culture shock) was apparent in our first week in Mexico.

When we were required to navigate the city of Querétaro by public transportation, we discovered that there were no maps or schedules for the bus lines. We quickly learned to signal aggressively for the bus for

fear that it would pass us up. Everyone had at least one unintended afternoon tour of the city—not the worst thing that can happen!

Of course, the city of about 700,000 has its finer points. The historical downtown ("El Centro") is filled with lovely plazas and monuments erected for the many historical figures that played an important part in Mexican history.

Some of our nights were spent at the discotheques—more nights for some than others! The clubs blast Mexican techno music and truly rival those that I have visited in Portland and even London.

I was also lucky enough to find great travel-mates to share my adventures. Who could forget our 15-hour overnight bus ride to Chiapas (the Mexican state bordering Guatemala), where we encountered ancient Mayan

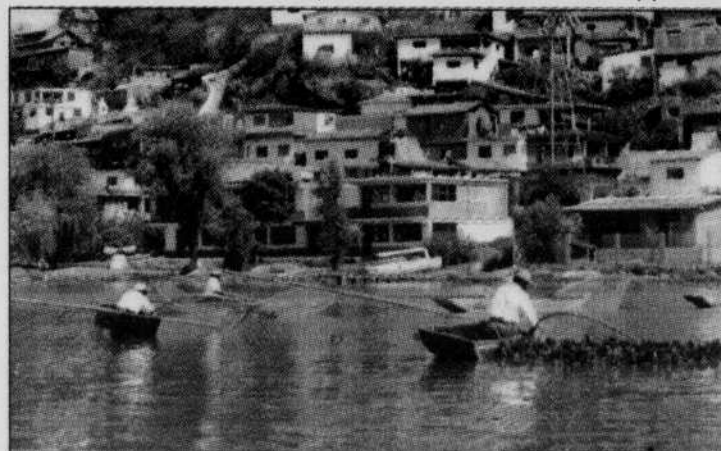
ruins, rich luscious scenery and beautiful cool waterfalls? For anybody appreciative of abundant green spaces,

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the state of Chiapas was absolute paradise.

But what I will remember most about Mexico is the kindness of the Mexican people. On many occasions, a patient and kind stranger helped me on my way. Sometimes the smile I received was just the push I needed to continue on my journey with the confidence that I would succeed. I can honestly say, after living abroad for four months, that I am ready for what life will bring me in the future!

Editor's Note: Jane Wong '04 majored in political science and studied in the spring semester program in Querétaro, Mexico, in 2004.



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