

ICWA LETTERS

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subSAHARAN AFRICA

*John B. Robinson is an Institute Fellow
studying the survival struggle of the
people and island of Madagascar.*

Here I Am

ANTANANARIVO, Madagascar

September 1, 1996

By John B. Robinson

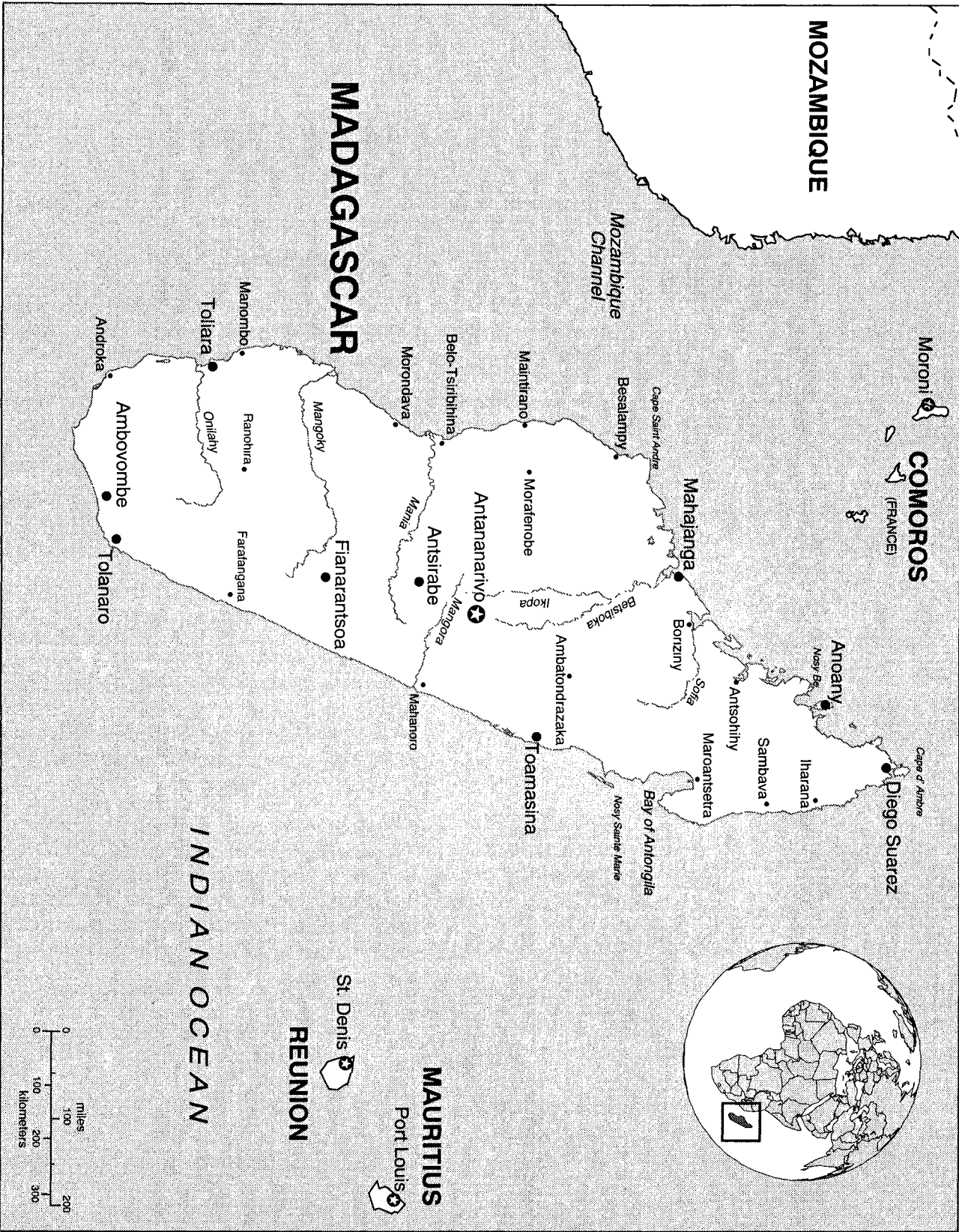
See the town of a thousand towns rise in red brick and rusty sheet metal from malarial swamps called rice paddies. Inhale the thick plumes of automobile exhaust pushing out from the stench of misery, defecation and rotting fruit. Feel the heat sear the back of your neck at midday, the cold penetrate your bone marrow at night. Descend from the highest of the many hills, where the burned-out hulk of the Queen's palace lords over the decay, and walk along the Avenue of Independence, where you will discover a sea of vendors sheltering under filthy white parasols. Take a sip of sweetened water drawn from an open bucket and think of the rice farmers working waist deep in the muck just a few hundred yards away. This is Antananarivo, capital of Madagascar, the standard of civilized living for an entire nation.

At Harvard, we always thought civilization started at the Yard and ended at the banks of the Charles. It always comes as somewhat of a shock, then, to discover a whole people who have never heard of Cambridge, and whose only direct knowledge of the United States comes from Hollywood action movies. Yet if I think of my own education, Madagascar came up only once, as a solution to "The Jewish Problem." Adolf Eichmann planned to ship several million Jews here on ocean liners departing from Hamburg. From what I remember, Hitler was behind the idea, but was blocked by the French. Before I drew up a fellowship proposal for the Institute of Current World Affairs, that is all I really knew.

My education — my upbringing is how we say it in New England — was quite provincial. I attended a private grammar school in Greenwich, Connecticut, where there was one black teacher and a couple of black students in all nine grades. There were no Hispanic students, and Spanish was simply not offered. That is why I studied French, when every other forward-looking child was learning to smash a piñata, and perhaps why I ended up with a French wife and



John Robinson graduated from Harvard University in 1991, then spent the next two years in Tanzania working as an English teacher and guide while teaching himself to write fiction. From 1993 to 1995 he attended the Creative Writing Program at Brown University where he completed a novella, *Kilimanjaro Burning*. He is married to a French oceanographer and together they have two young children Rowland and Nicolas. He is conversant in both French and Kiswahili.



two double nationality children living in Madagascar.

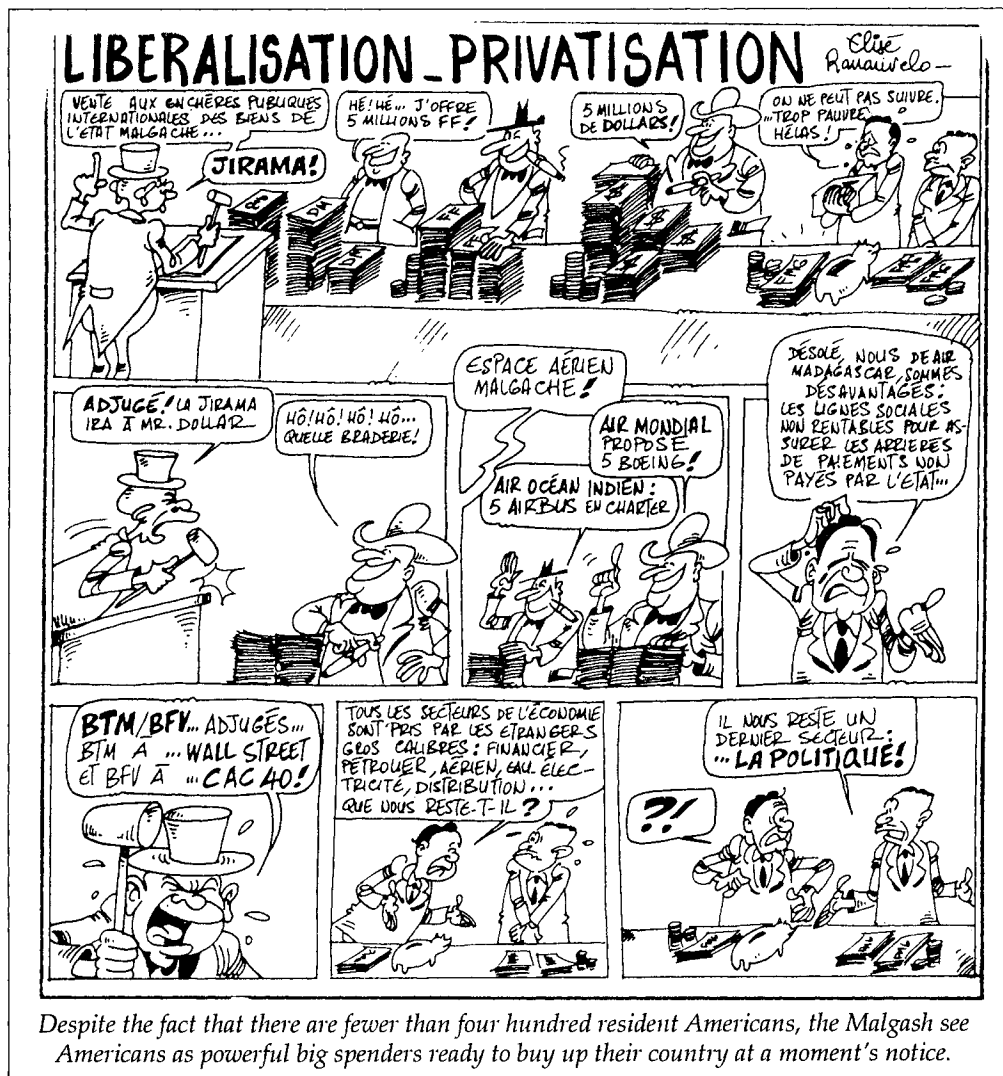
Where I grew up, Europe was still considered the epitome of civilized living. No one understood those countries over in Asia or the Middle East (although they learned quick after the oil crunch in 1974), and nobody, I promise you, mentioned Africa. Not once. When we talked about "the city," we talked about New York; the only city in the world to live next to, even if you didn't want to live in it.

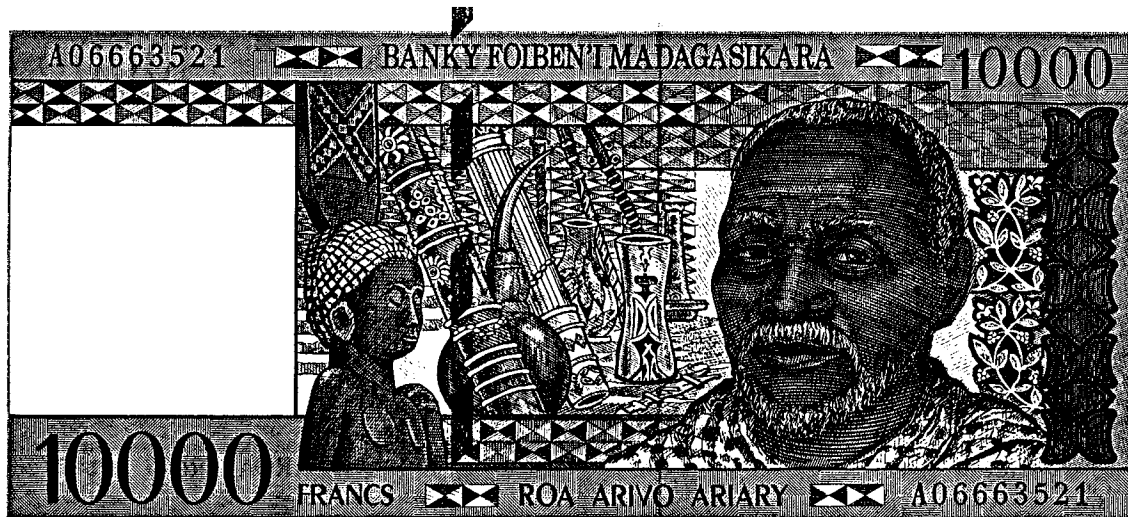
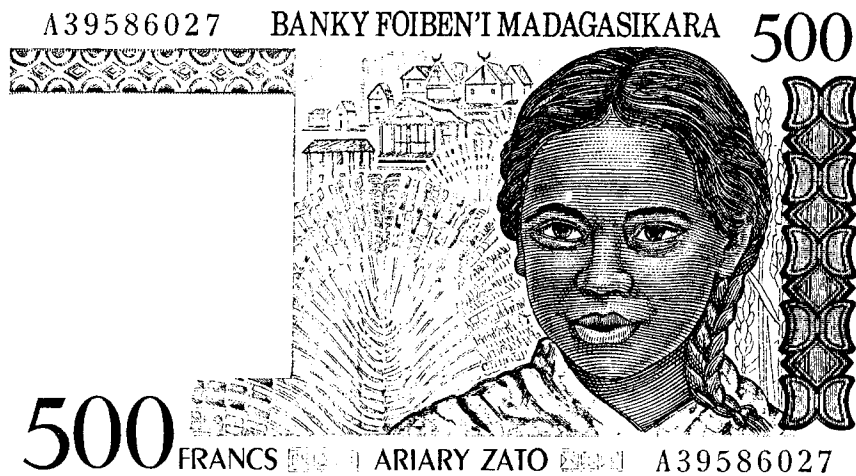
For vacations, my family traveled three hours by car to the land of our ancestors, Rhode Island. Southern Rhode Island was still mainly farms and vacant beaches, and I well remember our fishing boat was the fastest in the harbor with a Johnson 125 horsepower attached to its stern. This was the same place Prof. John Hazard's family originated, and in fact our two families (the Hazards and the Robinsons) intermarried several times over the generations, the last time being my great grandfather, Dr. Rowland Robinson and his bride, Mary Peace Hazard. In Rhode Island, we shucked corn, caught bluefish, went body surfing in

the waves at the Dunes Club. This was my whole world, and I never thought much beyond it.

Neither do the Malgash think much beyond what they see and experience. They are a small population of 14 million isolated on an enormous island the size of Texas. Their nearest neighbor of consequence is South Africa, but the South Africans don't have all that much patience for the slow bureaucracy, high transportation costs and minuscule market Madagascar represents. Tanzania does some trade with Madagascar, but it is sporadic and not very important, based on the need for cheap goods, and not very important. In fact, the only country (besides the Comores) that the Malgash are in contact with on a discernible level is France, their former colonial ruler and biggest trading partner.

I visited Kenya for six months when I was in college, and I lived in Tanzania for two years immediately after I graduated, so I know something of Africa. I was not prepared, however, for the sheer misery that exists in Antananarivo. Sick children the same size as my three-year-old son run in the traffic begging for food, soot-





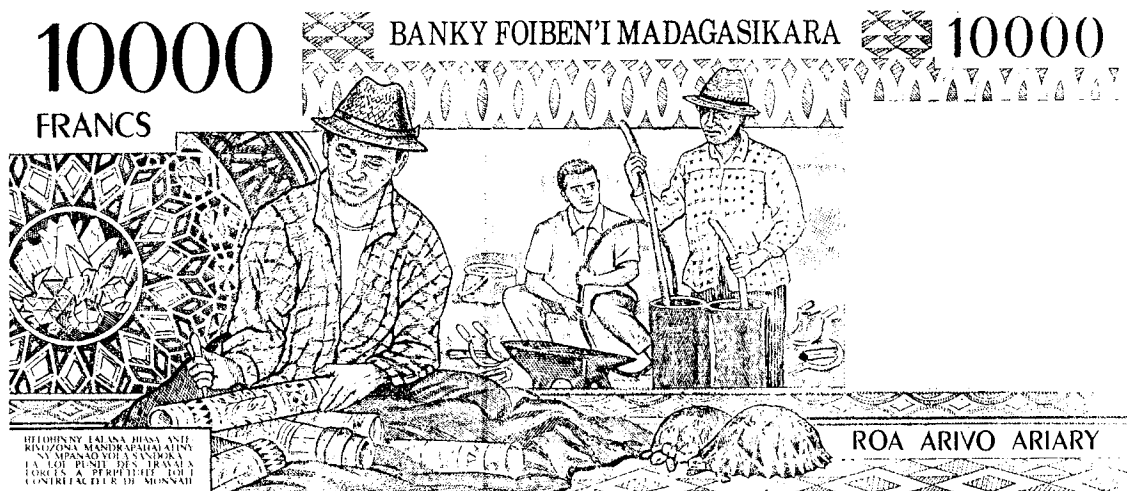
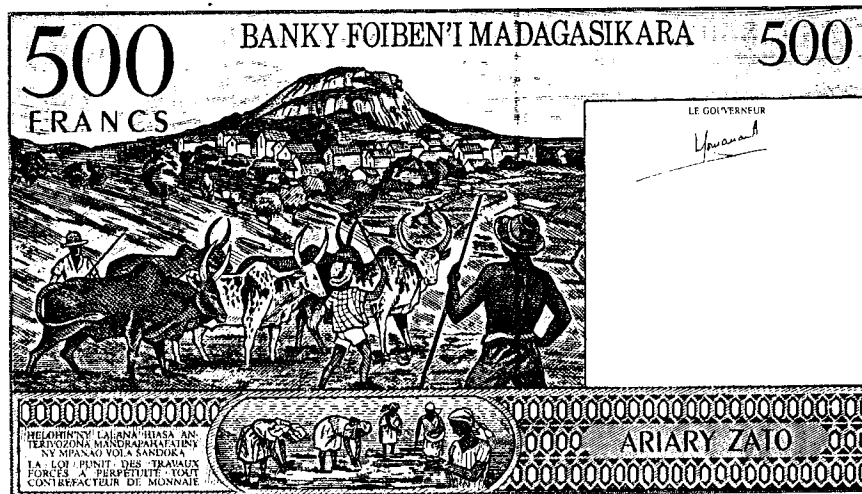
Franc notes showing the physiognomy of the Malgash

covered babies the same age as my 11-month-old son lie in the gutter next to charcoal sellers, the discos are packed with hundreds of teenage girls looking for a little cash or a way out. But even though the problems here are very similar, and the outcome perhaps worse than on mainland Africa, the Malgash do not consider themselves African in the slightest.

Due to their Indonesian origins and features, the Malgash, I suspect, consider themselves better than Africans. This barely detectable racism occurs also on the

national level. The Merina, who occupy the highland and who were once the kings and queens of this nation, consider themselves smarter than the coastal people. The most visible Malgash in Madagascar (except the president) are Merina, and they never lose the opportunity to point this out to a visitor.

This subtle yet important racism affects the way people think and the solutions they choose for a given problem. In Kenya, for example, the inability to look beyond tribal identification at a national level added to



Franc notes showing the topography of Madagascar

the levels of turmoil. Donor countries were sometimes identified with "white" objectives, and certain tribes saw their standard of living fall dramatically while the country as a whole remained reasonably well off. In Madagascar, the emphasis on ancestral origins, consultation with the spirits of the dead, and the real effect that has on everyday living, must in some way account for the current state of inequality.

Physically, I find it hard to sleep at the end of a day in Antananarivo. My nose drips constantly from the

curbside particulates in the air, my throat aches, the top of my mouth is usually raw from uncontrolled sneezing. When I close my eyes, I see faces filled with real want and real hunger. I see the garbage pickers working through meager piles of third-world refuse. This is Madagascar, a island nation unto itself, with its own laws, its own customs, its own squalor and grandeur, it's own idea of civilization. When I think of my origins, the clambakes on the shore, the well-trimmed hedges, the cool libraries filled with beautiful literature, I wonder, how did I get here? □

Institute Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey and Central Asia, and their importance as actors the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. [sub-SAHARA]

John Harris. A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

John B. Robinson. A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an english teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]

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