

Worlds Collide

Seth Amofa, Phillips Exeter Academy 21'

I find myself lost as I ponder the basic question “Where do I belong?” I could easily give one-word answers such as “Ghana”, “Chicago”, or even “Exeter.” My entire life has been defined by the big communities I have been a part of. These communities exposed me to a breadth of culture, experiences, and knowledge that has shaped the person I am today.

Ghana (2002-2010)

Ghana will forever be my home. *Why?* I spent the bulk of my childhood on this precious and fertile land. Back then, as a child, I only understood one thing: fun. My friends and I would run barefoot on the coarse hot sand throughout the village. I smelled the pleasant aroma of fufu (a fluffy ball of mixed plantain and cassava) and okro¹ soup wafted over us as we maneuvered in and out of the various compounds to find ourselves in the local recreational compound. Here, old men in multicolored Kente clothes that extended from their shoulders to their feet reclined in chairs and played the traditional game, Oware (Mancala). Perplexed by the movement across the board, we retreated and continued our adventure. Here and there, some townspeople would scream and warn us to slow down. We didn't stop nor care because we were kids, moving about quickly and enjoying ourselves. We were just kids. We belonged to each other. We were from the same compound in the village. Our houses were 15 feet apart. Our community values and heritage bonded us together.

America (Chicago 2010-2017)

¹ In Ghana, we call it okro not okra as we do in America.

Coming to America changed the course of my life, opening a Pandora's box of opportunities as well as challenges. Although I felt African and identified as African, America recognized and knew me as an African American. I didn't quite understand this. I didn't even have a say in it. I found myself quiet and withdrawn in school as I interacted with people who looked like me. They were black. I was black. They wore Jordans. I had on a pair of black church shoes I was born in Ghana and learned Twi as my first language. They were born in America. English was their first language. I understood English, but speaking was a challenge.

"What's your favorite food?" Rasheed asked Tiana in the cafeteria.

"Are you for real asking me what I love, like my favorite for real for real??" Tiana replied.

"Boi I love my momma's fried chicken and mac and cheese." she said.

Rasheed and others sitting at our table nodded.

Rasheed added, "For sho, You can't go wrong with fried chicken."

They all burst into laughter except me.

I felt lost. *What was fried chicken? What's so special? Chicken is chicken. I just eat chicken.*

The English they spoke was so foreign. I could barely parse out the words. The words flew right over my head. They spoke rapidly and shortened their words into phrases. Their sentences defied the English grammar rules. I wanted to understand and fit in so badly, so I broke the rules too: "Want to" turned into "finna," "alright" into "Aight" and "How are you?" into "Wassup chief." These words as they slipped from my mouth felt strange. This wasn't the English I was taught at home.

Coming home from school was such a big relief. I didn't have to pretend to fit in. Most people in the 26-floor apartment building I lived in were African. The sweet smell of cloves and maggie cube spices and jollof rice (orange rice, a mix of red stew and white rice) created a biome of its own in the hallways and elevators. It felt like I was back home in my Ghanaian village. Outside of the Ghanaian bubble in Uptown Chicago, everything seemed daunting and unfamiliar: the language barrier, cultural differences, and weather (*What is this white powder?* I asked when I arrived at O'Hare Airport for the first time).

Within the walls of the African community in Uptown, I felt safe .

However, I breached this safety when I moved out and attended boarding school in Exeter, NH.

Exeter, NH (2017-present)

I am here at Phillips Exeter Academy, the best private school in the U.S they say, once again in a tricky situation.

Most of the students on campus are white. The few black people I meet aren't African.

"Hello, my name is Seth and I am from Ghana, but I live in Chicago." I said to Andre.

"Hey what's up chief. I am Andre and I am from Georgia. My family and I have basically lived there our entire life," he replied.

"That's great! I moved here four years ago. It's a lot different than Ghana." I said. Each new place I have stepped in since 2010 has less Africans. From Ghana to Chicago to Exeter, the ghanaian population had decreased to one person.

I was that one person.

I was the only Ghanaian on campus.

What do I do? I asked myself. *What could I do to feel like I belong here? How could I navigate this new journey without any ghanaians?*

It took me about six months before I came to the conclusion that Exeter was my second home. In Latin club, we discussed the Odyssey, a greek poem about the hero Odysseus's return home from a long and cruel war. It was without a doubt, the best discussion I ever had. Not only did my peers demonstrate their love of classics through this discussion, but also touched upon the idea of what home means.

"When I think of home, I think of a place of laughter, food, and people gathered in one place participating in some activity." Joe said.

Sarah jumped right in and replied, "I feel like I am at home when I am with my friends, like you all, or whenever I head back to my family."

"Well for Odysseus, Home was more than the people, celebrations and etc. He loved the physical place and what it had to offer. Also he didn't want to die at sea and never be remembered." Calvin, a cohead, interjected.

"Does Oddysseus's yearn for home compare with what and where you call home?" he continued.

"Woaahhh guys, are we philosophers?" Joe remarked.

"No, we are not. We are simply pursuers of knowledge and happiness." Calvin said and then adjourned the meeting.

So many thoughts flashed across my mind. I was curious to know more and have more discussions like this. I felt that this discussion contributed to the nourishment of my critical thinking and reasoning skills beyond the classroom. I thought to myself, *If*

this is how Exeter is going to be for the next four years, I can't wait for more thought provoking and interesting conversations like this across all disciplines.

Though these were mere conversations, Exeter felt like a home away from home. This was a different feeling from Ghana. The culture and environment aspect from Ghana was absent, but I was maturing physically and mentally. One's identity didn't matter whenever I interacted with them. We just talked like what people do. It felt strange. This was a good kind of strange though.

Most of my life, I navigated this world by only relying on my Ghanaian heritage and background. *Who would have ever thought that my eyes would be open to the multitude and diversity of experiences I have encountered?* Through these experiences, I think I realised there are some places that I belong to and feel at home, but there are others where home vibes and sense of belonging aren't apparent and strong. I can't and simply won't choose one place to define where I belong because that wouldn't be true. I, Seth Amofa, typing these words would be deceiving myself if I declared Ghana, Chicago, or Exeter to be the only place I felt at home. I am me because of the myriad blend of experiences in each of these places. So, stop asking where do you belong? Turn that question into a statement of *I belong, or I am XYZ because of XYZ things that have occurred to me in my life.*