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NEAT
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So often the search for self begins with reflections we see in the faces of others, with the need to be able to claim the community in which we live, the one that defines our day-to-day reality. When I first arrived in America from Ghana at the age of six, I would imagine my future in the eyes of strangers, people I met on the street or in school, people who didn't look, sound or live anything at all like me and my family. There was one girl in particular whom I chose to emulate, a classmate with bushy brown hair and skin the color of a newly turned autumn leaf. Her image and presence are still caged in the depths of my memory; only her name has escaped.

I would beg my mother to buy me clothes that I had seen this girl wear. I would tease and coerce my hair into styles similar to hers. Each time she spoke, I memorized her colloquialisms, her inflections, the way she stretched her vowels so that their sounds remained suspended in mid-air even after she had stopped talking. I wanted to know her world; this was the most direct route my child-mind found to arrive at a place, that specific place, of belonging. And because, like most children, I did not know how to belong in and to several places at once, that arrival also signaled a departure.

The process of leaving behind one's beginnings is always bittersweet. It is the bare-boned excitement of a new discovery cloaked with the burden of
shame. It is the line of demarcation between happiness
and horror, that moment you realize that your loyalties are
colliding, that the person you love best in one setting is the
person who brings you the most embarrassment in another.
And, inevitably, that person ends up being a member of
your own family.

While growing up, both my mother and my father took
equal albeit involuntary turns being that person. I would
dread bumping into friends when I was out and about with
either of my parents. They both clung to Ghanaian culture
too tightly for my newly Americanized taste. Their jewelry,
their clothing; hearing the unconstrained way in which they
spoke English made me cringe. It was all well and good
behind the closed-door comfort of our home but, in public,
I just wouldn’t do. I no longer wanted to recognize myself
in them. But, of course, I always did. I had to. They held
the key that I needed to unlock the door to my past.
And there, pressed in the palms of that past, were all the
necessary tools to harvest my ripening individuality. The
only way I could move forward was by reaching back.

Sometime last year, I stopped at a grocery store to pick
up a few items and, as I entered, I noticed that a woman
standing in the queue at the check-out register was closely
watching me. She was wearing jeans, a plain white tee
shirt and Air Jordans. Her hair was braided in extended
corn rows. Despite her “all-Black-American” appearance,
I could tell that she was not from this country. It was in
the way she stood, the way she stared. Her face was dark
and chiseled — unmistakably West African — like mine,
like the faces of my aunts and cousins. We could have
easily been kin.

Her shopping cart was brimmed with food: bags of
rice, peanut butter jars, boxes of mashed potato mix, a
package of ox tails, fresh fish wrapped in stark white
paper, spinach, onions, eggplants, potatoes. I could guess
the meals that would be prepared with the groceries she
was buying, meals my mother used to cook for us —
groundnut soup, or kontumare with fufu — meals I loved.

When I passed by this woman, she looked directly at me.
It seemed that she, too, could tell that I was not what
I seemed. “How are you?,” she said. There was a rich
familiarity in her voice. Her accent was thick and guttural.
I knew then that she was definitely a Ghanaian. I opened
my mouth and responded. “I’m fine. And you?” My
accent, clearly East Coast American.

“Oh,” she said through a slight grin of embarrassment,
“I thought you were somebody I knew. It is just that you
look like...uh, well, pardon the mistake.” I could see that
she was disappointed and, reluctantly, I was too. I knew
that she wanted my voice to echo the call of home, to offer
her some sort of remembrance or reunion. I considered
telling the woman that she had not made a mistake. I
wanted desperately to be able to say: I am who you think
I am. But I did not, because it wouldn’t have been as
simple as that. I knew that such statements only prompted
questions. Questions that would challenge the authenticity
of my Africanness: Where were you born? What happened
to your accent? Do you even speak any of our languages?
Why are you so American? Questions that I do not yet
know the answers to. What did happen to my accent?
Why am I so American?

Without another word to the woman, I turned and
walked away; I disappeared into the crowd and wandered
through the aisles of the store in much the same way as
I have wandered through the margins of this country —
wide-eyed and awkwardly — trying all too hard not to get
lost. But I carried her gaze with me. And it filled me with
such joy and freedom because I suddenly realized that no
matter what direction I chose or where my journeys landed
me, someone or something would always cross my path
and lead me back home.

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journalist and frequent contributor to the Taper programs.