Ezgi Sertler

**The Elusive Home and the Question “Where are you from?”**

After spending five years in the United States as an international student “from Turkey,” I was a little freaked out when I first noticed that I seemed to have lost the feeling of home. Five years seemed enough to make me feel not at home in Turkey, and to make me less and less certain what that word, Turkey, means. But it was not enough to make me feel at home here in Lansing either. I had been vaguely familiar with different forms of this in-between-ness as experienced by some of my relatives who have migrated to Germany. Now, a specific form of it became a reality for me. I started paying attention to how I was feeling in-between. There were some identifiable social dynamics making up this in-between-ness: some relationships with people living in Turkey who relate to me only as someone who has left “home” followed by some others with people living in the U.S., who relate to me only as someone “foreign” in one way or another. These relationships influence the way in which you experience yourself in this new space. But they do not exhaust the experience, nor do they fully explain it. There are also economic, international and political dynamics that contribute to this in-between feeling, which call for an analysis that I cannot do justice here. However, once I started paying attention to how I was feeling in-between, two things struck me the most: I felt like (and still do) I had more than one life and more than one self.

Every time I traveled from Turkey to the U.S. or the other way around, I started feeling like I was not traveling within the same life, but felt as if I was changing lives. I knew that my life in Turkey and my life in the U.S. did not touch each other very often but I still could not explain for a while why hearing my mother’s voice on the phone right after my plane lands in Chicago
disoriented me. My mother’s voice is my mother’s real/material presence for my life in Turkey, but my mother’s voice is my mother’s virtual presence on phone, on Skype, on WhatsApp for my life in the U.S. Thus, for a split second, her voice startles me, upsets me, and puts me at unease right after I land because I cannot locate what her voice translates to: Nine or ten hours ago it was her real presence, and now it became her virtual one. It is a real voice of course, right there in my ear, but it often feels more like a vivid memory. Digesting that, processing what her voice means in this life takes sometimes a few seconds, sometimes a few minutes, sometimes a few days. No matter how long it takes, it makes you feel the distance between these lives. This distance, I find myself thinking, must explain the yearning I have for my mother to visit me here in Lansing. Having her here for a while, sharing some of this life’s experiences with her at the moment they take place. This, I think, might help me, might allow her presence in this life to be more than virtual. If it happens, will this feeling of having distanced lives go away? I doubt it. I now pay attention to the elements (similar to my mother’s voice) which have different meanings in my lives, meanings that I cannot unify.

It would be weird not to expect these different lives to form different selves. People (who comment on language learning) always tell you that once you start living in a language, one of the most interesting experiences is that you start dreaming in that language. What they do not tell you is that you start talking to yourself in your different languages too, and that you start thinking about yourself and the world in this different language, and that these selves that you talk to in different languages are different selves. I talk to myself sometimes in Turkish, sometimes in English. Myself who I talk to in English and myself who I talk to in Turkish are different from each other. They do not feel the same feelings.
Feeling sad in English is different from feeling sad in Turkish. My sense of humor in English is different from my sense of humor in Turkish. If I love someone in the U.S. (as a friend or as a partner) I love them in English not in Turkish. This might mean many different things. This might mean that I need to figure out new loving words. If I do direct translations from my native language, they might not work. If I do not do direct translations but try to catch the same feeling in English, that will require a lot of work with new words (sometimes with the new words I cannot feel yet). And even when I put in the work, something is always lost in translation. So you come to realize that you have to love differently in Turkish and in English.

When you start sensing these differences between lives and selves and the form of in-between-ness peculiar to you, the feeling of home becomes a little bit elusive. Its absence becomes its presence, and it is not easy to figure out how to process this present absence at first. It is not easy to leave uniform, “standing still,” “always present,” “always there” feelings of home behind and to welcome complex and “always moving” feelings of home. It is a long process where you learn to look for what makes you feel like you are home. Seeing an old friend somewhere overseas becomes home, cooking a meal together becomes home, a smell that you run into becomes home, finding similar ways of thinking about stuff with people all around the world becomes home, finding similar phrases that you and your friends use becomes home, finding a joke that speaks to you becomes home, laughing out loud to a joke your sister wrote on WhatsApp becomes home. The list continues and meanwhile you develop new practices that open up new feelings of home.

While I am learning to live with this elusive feeling of home, there is one question that I understand less and less: Where are you from? This is not to say that the question itself is always meaningless or pointless. The question, in fact, is sometimes pragmatic, sometimes political, sometimes informative, and it serves more than one purpose most of the time. However, the
question is limited and limiting. This limitation became clear to me when I was in another country which was neither Turkey nor the United States. People started asking where I’m from while trying to get to know me. I felt this huge need to say “I’m from ‘Turkey’ and I’ve lived in the US for the last six years.” I have thought a lot about why I felt that need, why I felt the need to add that “and.” What was preventing me from stopping at Turkey and not saying anything about the U.S.? What was I trying to get at by lengthening my response? Was I thinking that stopping at “I’m from Turkey” was going to reinforce a clear feeling of home that I do not have anymore? Did I think that adding the U.S. to my response will help me to hint at another response: “it’s not simple anymore!”? The question “where are you from” is framed in a way that cannot accommodate all the possible experiences of from-ness, or belonging, or home. When it is asked, it does not allow your life in different places to weigh into the picture. It overlooks your experience in different places and their possible formative power on yourself and on your life.

That is why I felt home in so many ways when I heard Taiye Selasi (a writer who describes herself as “born in London raised in Boston, lives in New York, New Delhi, Rome”) encouraging us to leave the question “where are you from” and start asking “where are you a local?”.” “I’m not from Ghana,” she says, “but I’m a local of Accra.” “I’m not from the U.S.,” she continues, “but I’m a local of New York.” Locality that is determined by our daily rituals (what practices we embody in our everyday life), our relationships (people who we speak to very often), and our restrictions (where we live and its social and political dynamics, where we can/cannot live, which passports we hold, where we can go and where we cannot go), she argues, can tell our experiences better than a country. A country or a nation state, a relatively new concept, fails to explain where a human being can be from. “I am from my experiences,” she says, and I feel home listening to her.
Owing My City

I remember packing my suitcase to move to Michigan on the day of my flight. My mom came into the living room, where all my things were stacked, and mockingly asked if I was going to move for good due to the amount of clothes I had. For me, that was yesterday, yet here I am, almost two years and a half later. I remember thinking to myself, “What am I going to do?” That was it, I was moving. Moving from that chaotic city of 11 million people, where I had lived all my life, moving away from my routine of 18 years, moving away from the comfort of my home, and the hardest of all, moving away from my family and friends. I did not know what to think or what to expect. So I kept questioning myself over and over, “What am I really going to do?” I was about to embark on a new journey, one in which I could not wait for, but nonetheless was as scared as a little girl getting lost from her mother at the park.

In 5th grade, during read aloud, my teacher read to us O.T Nelson’s “The Girl Who Owned a City,” where a virus struck the world, and people over the age of 12 were gone. As a result kids have to live on their own, and figure things out as they go. Lisa, a 10-year old, develops her own system, in which she works hard to protect her younger brother, by fighting her fears and accepting challenges. This way, she is able to gain leadership and guarantees safety for herself and the other children against the gangs. This story never escaped my mind, and so I decided to buy that book, and here I am, a 20-year old, reading a 10-year old book, in which I cannot seem to let go. I have been carrying it with me since the day I got it. For some reason, I feel a strong connection with this story. I see myself as Lisa, where I put myself out there, and play along as I go. In this journey, I have learned a lot about myself. Most importantly I have learned about not being so harsh on myself, and that this way, life becomes lighter. And just like Lisa, I had to adapt to the new norms, new behaviors, and new encounters. Being here seems like a completely different world, one in which I engage in daily adventures.
“So, are you moving back to Brazil after you graduate?” “I am not sure.” “So what do you want to do once you are done here?” “Good question.” So many times I am caught in a situation where I am questioned about my plans, and I do not have an answer. I thought this indecisiveness would end after I decided what college to attend, little did I know that was only the beginning. Me, Isabella, a 20-year-old girl, constantly mistaken by a 15-year old, now having to make “grown up” choices and decisions, when I thought the answers would come so easily. However, they have become harder, and more questionable. Why does it seem like everyone knows what they want? Then there is me, still that little girl lost in the park, wondering around, trying to get past the crowd of people. As I lay down at night, my mind is filled with all sorts of thoughts and emotions. It is like a city in there, one like my own, that never stops. I question myself along with my purpose, trying to plan out what steps I have to take. This is what Lisa does, goes to bed each night lost in her thoughts and plans, without noticing time flying by.

Ever since I got here, I noticed how people are very independent. Everyone is so caught up in their own things that they end up missing out on what is happening around them. As I make my way to class, I see people in the same city, East Lansing, yet in different worlds. If that makes any sense. People with headphones, caught up in their music, shutting themselves from their surroundings. So close, but at the same time so far, it is as if the distance just keeps getting bigger. As I watch this crowd of people heading towards their destination, I catch myself thinking about those questions that are constantly thrown at me, even though I try to avoid it. I am an international student from São Paulo, Brazil; The city of chaos, the country of love and warmth. Different from Brazil, it seems like the people here are so used to doing things on their own, that sometimes it is as if you are invading their space when you try to interfere.

I meet someone and catch myself leaning for the hug, but stop myself once I remember that this is not home. People here are colder, very different from the Brazilians, which ends up making the winters even harsher. I have become friends with one of the CATA bus drivers, and the first time we met, I stood next to him throughout the entire ride home, and for most of the ride, we were in disbelief that the girl who had walked in before me didn’t even reply to his hello. Does it really take that much of time of your busy schedule to answer a simple greeting? Now whenever I see him I run to his bus to go say hi and give him a hug, even if that is not the bus I have to take, and I can see some people in a way surprised by that. However, in truth I am the one who is actually surprised at their indifference towards others. Last week for example, I went into a shoe store and tried on a few shoes but ended up not purchasing any. I left, got
myself a cinnamon pretzel and went back to the same store. While I was waiting for my friend, I offered the saleswoman a piece of my pretzel and she took it. We talked for a while, and after a moment she turned to me and said that I was the best customer she has ever had. I was surprised and in a way curious to why she had said that since I acted in a way that seems to be quite expected back at home, however my empathy towards her hard work and dedication seemed to make her really happy and amazed. Is it that hard to be so kind as to offer someone a piece of your pretzel? I cannot expect people to act in that manner, but perhaps I can be an influence, just like Lisa is to many people in her town.

In order to answer my own questions of doubt, I have learned to take initiatives, to stand up for myself and for my desires. People's distance would not stop my closeness to what I truly enjoy. By joining different groups and organizations, I have made this huge campus embellished by so much culture and passion, become small and warm, a place where I can actually call home. Throughout my years here, I have learned that it is okay to not know exactly what path to take, as long as I am aware of the directions I should follow. I acquired understanding, by observing. This is what I do, especially when I am on the bus for example, where I now consider myself an expert of the routes, where in São Paulo my parents would have to drive me around. This sense of independence is bitter sweet. I feel like I have the world in my hands, but at the same time the inner child in me gets scared and hesitant. Deep down, I am still the little girl lost in the park, however my inner Lisa leads the way, and I have to say she does a pretty good job at it.

As O.T Nelson says in his book, “Animals, maybe aren’t so lucky. All they do is what they do, what their instincts tell them. They can’t invent plans, and make choices, and dream about tomorrow,” and that could not make more sense to me. Even though we are lost at times, we have the power to carefully weigh our decisions. We are not animals, and different from them, we are lucky enough to be able to hope for our desires. I think everyone should have their own city, like Lisa, and in mine I am not scared of being confused. I am actually thankful that I have my ambitions. In my city, I do not hesitate taking risks because of others, and I don’t change my way of doing certain things simply because people around me do it differently. In my city I get scared, but in the midst of the nights, I tell myself that I can do it. In other words, my city never ceases to amaze me. Here in America, I have adapted but not changed. I have come to realize that people are the way there are, and you can’t try to change them. I will fight my fears, the same way Lisa fights the gangs, and I will come up with my own system to face my struggles and challenges. I want to be the girl who owns my city. I will own my city.
Sourced Myself with Resources

I do not remember a day back in Ghana that went by without affronts and curses or sticks being thrown at me. In fact, that was my life every day. I woke up every morning prepared for the harsh world because I am effeminate. Yes! I have a light voice and feminine mannerisms although I was born male. I was born into a single parent home in Ghana, and raised by my mother. Life has been rough for her. She tried her best possible way to cater for me but sometimes affording school fees was a bane. Growing up was unpleasant for me. My sexuality was always questioned, denizens yelled insults at me all the time and made my life miserable. I felt socially disoriented because I was always ostracized by my peers and treated with disdain and this contributed to my low self-esteem. My requests to participate in school activities and clubs in high school were mostly turned down because the image of the club and school mattered. The only school club I was accepted into was the drama club solely because it was an all-boys school and some guys were needed to take up feminine roles. I knew I had a great personality but I never let it shine. The only thing I was respected for in Ghana was my academics. I was a good student, and I aced most of my classes. Aside from that, no one really appreciated anything I did. I either walked with my head down or ran for my life because strangers accused me of being gay and homosexuality is a crime in Ghana. In view of this, I tried my best to apply for scholarships in the USA in order to survive because they were more accepting. Fortunately for me, I landed a full-ride scholarship to study at MSU with the MasterCard Foundation and that began my transition.

I arrived on MSU’s beautiful campus on the 15th of August. I came to the USA with the belief that everything was going to be alright. After all, the people here are more approachable and the school has a great academic standing. I did notice people were very friendly and did not complain about my demeanor, but there was something that was still missing. I still had very low self-esteem. I still had the
mindset that people hated me once they saw me. At least I knew I was in a safe place at MSU because they embraced diversity, but there was still this issue of self-acceptance that kept troubling me. I had no friends because I felt that the only people who liked me would approach me themselves. In Ghana, if I talked to anyone I was disgraced right on the spot. It was different here. People are friendly in a sense that they smile and look welcoming but do not usually walk up to you and start a conversation. So, I still found it difficult to make friends. My self-esteem issues started to heighten when my academics were a little shaky. I knew that this was one thing I was good at and I could prove my worth with. But in this case, I did not even know how to use a calculator. I was used to a different type of calculator unlike the one used for my class. I could not even solve basic equations due to different mathematical rules being taught. And in cases where we had group discussions, I was afraid to talk because I was an international student and also took into consideration my gender identity and demeanor. Additionally, if I got the problem right I would second guess myself since I learnt it differently back home and I did not want to embarrass myself. I felt as if I had made a terrible mistake opting to study at MSU. Although I was being attacked and despised because of my demeanor back home, at least I felt okay because of my academics. I also had my mom and brother who would support me all the time, but in this case I could not talk to them because I had no phone. This caused me to feel useless both in my social and academic life. I felt I was not worth living because no matter where I was, I still had life uneasy. Due to my mistreatment back home, I did not even know how to make friends. I could not even utter “hello” when I saw friendly people, although inwardly I wanted to say, “Hello, how was your day?” so badly!

As time went on, it hit me that I have always wanted to be here. Now that I am here all I do is complain and make myself feel worse. It dawned on me that there are a lot of resources here on campus and now that I had them, I was not even utilizing them. I started using resources like the Math Learning Center, office hours, and LGBT Centers just to name a few. Through that I got a lot of help. I learnt how to use a calculator at the Math Learning Center, understood class work more with the help of office hours, and I also learnt to love myself more through the LGBT Resource Center. At first, I was very skeptical using the LGBT Resource Center because I felt people were going to judge me and treat me in the manner
I was used to back home. But when I finally got the courage to attend, I must say I never regretted it. I met amazing people like Amber Cordell who helped me love myself more and taught me how to socialize better. I realized that it was not that people did not want to talk to me because of my race or gender identity, but because they were also shy. They were just as shy to speak to me like I was to speak to them. It is easier for students to mingle with people similar to them. They just opted for the simpler path and I totally concur because I would have done the same. Being gay or feminine does not make me less of a human than any other student on campus, and that is one thing I learnt here at MSU. I grew up believing I was a disgrace to my family because after everything they did to make me happy, all I did was bring them shame. But now I do not think being feminine is something to be ashamed of, but a very unique trait that I am proud of. Amber keeps reminding me of Brene Brown’s quote that says “Just because someone isn’t willing or able to love [you] does not mean [you] are unlovable.” And this is a quote I live by. With all the help given to me by the various resources, I was able to get out of my shell and be who I wanted to be. Yes! There were some things that I naturally adapted to, like the food and temperature. I ended up loving the food I did not really like before and got used to the temperature changes.

I realized this school would do anything to help their students to thrive and I am really glad I made the choice to attend here. I was very surprised when I was able to move to another residential hall to live with a girl although I was a guy just because I was not very comfortable with my previous living arrangement. I discovered myself using MSU’s resources and I am so proud of myself for that. I can now say my academics are great and that I am right on track, my professors can bear witness to that. I am also proud to say my social life is equally great. I am in three clubs I really love; Mix It Up Dance Club, MSU Volleyball Club, and Roial Players Drama Club. I even had the chance to perform in parades and an upcoming play due to my involvement. Back home, I was not allowed to join clubs or participate in many activities just because of certain traits of mine, but here I am doing what I love and I am doing it well. I discovered myself through MSU’s resources and I could not be happier with the person who I am today.
Hlokomelang Deiv Rakajoana  

From The Rags to the Rafters

Fastidiously choosing “the best” among my clothes and important belongings, I leisurely packed my black and orange L.L. Bean bag three weeks before my departure date. I had waited for four full years to get a chance to study in the U.S. and when the opportunity came I could not let it slip. The anticipation was elating and the same time prodigiously petrifying because I was about to embark on a completely different journey to a new country half-way across the world, where I was going to be the first and only student from Lesotho (a country most people have never heard of). I had followed MSU life for so long, and I was well “acquainted” with the Spartan life.

I grew up in a very rural village in Lesotho, Southern Africa, surrounded by my penury-struck extended family. I was raised by my grandmother and grandfather (after I lost both parents when I was one), and we lived a hand-to-mouth life in which everyone in the family had to find food every day to share with the rest of the family. None of family members has college education. As a result, they did not have much passion for education. I, however, wanted to get educated so much that I stopped at nothing to make sure of it. My dreams dealt with a heavy blow when my grandfather made me look after his animals and stopped me from going to school: he claimed there was no money to pay for my fees and refused to sell one of his sheep so he could pay for my fees. I became a full-time shepherd, taking five lonely sheep, a cow, and donkey to the veld every morning for three consecutive years. I had just done my first grade and I wanted to continue with school so much that I constantly begged my grandmother to talk to him, with the hope of having him change his mind but, alas, with no success. I endured the pain each morning I had to wake up to do what was now my daily routine. I would go for the whole day without food and the only meal I would get was dinner, and sometimes there would be nothing to eat. Perhaps it is worth mentioning that throughout this time, I suffered physical and verbal abuse from my grandfather but he never deterred me from wanting to be educated.

Feasibly I would have stayed a herd-boy forever had I not learned something from my grandmother: ability to hang on no matter the challenges. She was not educated but she saw how
passionate and euphoric I was about education. In light of that, she gave me all the support she could proffer despite my grandfather dominating her. I decided to defy my grandfather and went back to school when free primary education commenced in Lesotho. I worked hard throughout my early education and high school (which was sponsored by a good Samaritan and a Peace Corps Volunteer, Mrs. Ronna Abbott from New York). I still remember in 2008 telling Mrs. Abbott that I would like to study in an American university after high school and she had a strong negative opinion about it. She did not have enough information and thought it was not possible. Yes, a boy from a village was dreaming big. I was not going to get discouraged no matter what. I was ready to face any challenges that ensued. After high school I applied to many US universities and colleges and none of the eighteen schools saw the potential in me: they all offered me admission but none was willing to offer me financial assistance. Coming from a very small country, I never heard much about many opportunities, but when I learned about Michigan State University and their prestigious scholarships in 2013, I planned everything out and spent so much time learning about what would be my next home. I was all alone in planning this: living alone in the city I had my grandmother’s support whom—every time I called—would tell me to never give up on what I wanted the most in life as long as it guarantees happiness and success. Yes, my grandmother had heard many people talk negatively about my “American Dream”: many held a high opinion that I was wasting my precious time and brain trying to study in America when no one from my family even made it to university. The pressure from my friends was immense: they would constantly reprimand that I was wasting my time and missing out a chance to be successful and start working. Little did they realize that I did not just want to be in any school for the sake of being in school and doing something about my life. I had a dream and I was not going to change it no matter what.

Fast forward to today, I am on one of the most intimidatingly big college campuses in the United States, way bigger than I anticipated. It’s a universal belief that it is not easy to be away from home, but that cannot be applied here: I have found yet another home at MSU, a home that is more accommodating and decorated with abundance of helpful resources in close proximity. Surrounded by very welcoming people, I feel the sense of belonging; the admissions officers whom I had been in frequent contact with
(before coming here) are as friendly and resourceful as they had been in shaping my path to MSU. Amid the joys of finally being a Spartan, fear of being the only one from Lesotho (among 50,000 students) on MSU campus never stopped haunting me. It is the fear that overshadowed me until I landed in Lansing Airport, where I received perhaps one of the warmest receptions in my entire life. The MasterCard Foundation Program Director at MSU, Dr. Kalumbu, Mr. Alex Smith and other MasterCard scholars who had gone out to welcome new scholars, all did away with the heavy cloud that had been above me from Lesotho, through South Africa and Germany. It is not often that “total strangers” show so much concern about how “another stranger’s” journey was, but the warmth and attention from the afore-mentioned team aroused realization that I was not lost. After months and months of exchanging WhatsApp texts with other admitted students from Africa (under the MasterCard Scholarship Program), the excitement of finally meeting each other was insurmountable. The latter further ameliorated my confidence: I felt I was “home” among beautiful people whom we exchanged conversations like we have known one another for years.

Half way through fall, I still get tons of questions from friends and strangers in Lesotho who want to know how the campus and “America” is. Many are students who want to study at MSU, so they want to know more before applying. The rest are people who are really fascinated by MSU. Every time I try to explain to my friends and family how huge the campus is, it as if I am exaggerating, until I send them the pictures, which do not really portray accurately the vastness of this school. MSU is perhaps six times the size of the National University of Lesotho, and as you would expect, breaking this to anyone who cannot picture or even think it can be that big always comes off superlative. In like manner, breaking down the on-campus resources- the likes of dining halls, academic support centers, abundant tutors and inclusion centers- overwhelms those students whom I am helping with their applications. We always want to study in the US but we never realize how big the colleges and universities are until someone breaks it down to us. The reality is more overwhelming when you are on a huge campus like this one of the number one land-grand university- MSU. For the first time in my entire academic career, I have never felt so engaged in every subject I am taking. I doubted some of the courses I had to take, specifically ISS 230-
Government and the Individual. I cannot say the same now: it has been one of the most mesmerizing and stimulating classes I have taken thus far. I am more cognizant of the contemporary world now.

What a year it has been for my family and I. Finally, the doors have opened and everyone can exult after years and years waiting to become a meaningful Spartan family member. I have already started collecting anything that has “Michigan State Spartan” on it because it is the pride of my family; they will be overjoyed to receive such presents. MSU is my home now, a place where everyone shines while the outsiders whine: I fought, I overcame. Now the biggest “expedition” that lies ahead of me is raising the Lesotho and Spartan flag high.
IN MY SHOES

“Dirt smudges on your shoes are like wounds and scars inflicted by life, they create character.” I came across this quote one time as I was reading through Instagram trying to contemplate this essay. What I found peculiar about this quote is how it eludes to tragedy and pain as ingredients necessary to produce beauty. It is my senior year here at MSU, and as my undergraduate tenure comes to a bittersweet end I would like to share a snippet of my four plus years’ journey here. This is by no means intended to be a rant, but if it sounds like it is please bear with me. I am in no way a malicious person. I have lived and laughed, cried and rejoiced, hungered and been filled, fell and risen, but most importantly I have willed myself through it all. Feel free at any moment in time to walk away and regroup if this gets too heavy for you.

I was born and raised in a small country embedded at the heart southern Africa, a country known as Botswana. The day I was born fell exactly on the day Botswana celebrates her independence, and I consider it the utmost honour – and maybe even a prophecy, so do not be shocked when I one day become president. I consider my parents to be oracles of some sort because they could have chosen a generic name to go with the theme of the day (as is customary in many African cultures), but they called me “Boitshoko” which translates to patience or perseverance. It was as if they knew that one day I would be a Spartan, and patiently persevere through the trials and tribulations of being an international student at Michigan State University.

I grew up a product of a tri-cultural matrimony, my father being a Mongwato, mother being a Mokalaka, and the British empire being my step-mother. So color was never a foreign concept, but race was. So as destiny would have it, I found myself embarking on my first solo journey overseas to East Lansing,
Michigan, a place I would call home for the next four years. Upon my arrival, I felt what it was like to live as a foreigner for the first time in my life. The first conversation I had was on the way to McDonel Hall in a cab. The cab driver told me about an international student who just passed away only a two weeks into arriving in the United States for their college experience. I felt my stomach sink at that moment, wondering how my mother would even find out if anything happened to me – I didn’t even have a phone yet. So my goal for that first week of orientation was to try not to die, at least until I got a cell phone so I could send a quick text to my family if I felt my life slipping at any point in time.

A few quotes I picked up as I grew up were, “motho ke motho ka batho” and “mabogo dinku a thebana”. The former means that my identity is intricately tied to that of my community, and the latter states that one can truly thrive in life by living in communion with those around them. Step mother had also told me that “when in Rome, do as the Romans do” so I decided to live and learn immersed within as many cultures as I could. So with these three proverbs at the forefront of my mind I decided to engage in community with very little reservations. But I soon found out about race, and its role in the impediment of my social immersion. All of a sudden I had a new mother, and she was called black culture. Whenever people saw me, they would somehow see her resemblance on my face, and constantly made it a point to get me to exhibit her mannerisms. But when I was with her children, they would constantly tease me about how I had a different mother and how weird my mannerisms and perceptions were.

The classroom spaces were even more traumatic. I was forced to carry the expectations of all the black people all over the world. My knowledge was always seemly in question, as if my origins somehow dictate a menial level of competency embody on any subject matter. American students could never understand the dexterity with which I handled the English language, the command I demonstrated on logic and reasoning, my grasp and abilities in mathematics and science – all because I was born in Africa. At times I wondered if they would think to themselves, “Africa must be so poor that with 99 cents a day you can feed them and teach them too”. This also was a common occurrence with professors who felt I
was not capable of comprehending complexities and intricacies of content. I remember one time in a philosophy class a comment was left which read, “This was surprisingly well constructed and articulated.” I felt insulted, belittled and undermined but I chose not to press the issue. I told myself I knew my worth so I should not be the least bothered by what this individual had to say.

However, I have great memories while being here at MSU as well. I remember during the first week marching to the office of the Provost for the College of Natural Sciences with Samuel Akwei-Sekyere to personally inquire about undergraduate research positions. The blissful moment when Dr. Abramovitch gave me my first undergraduate research position. I recall moments of jubilation when we won the Big Ten football championship and the school rioted at Cedar Village (it was cool). Days when I would be playing pick-up soccer at the IM East fields with students from all over the world. The first show I worked as a student lighting technician at the Wharton center. Bitter moments where I wanted to personally give a beat-down to the basketball team for losing their first March Madness game. Last but not least I will remember the professors who gave me a chance to be me, provided me opportunities to change lives. Many thanks to the lives that allowed me to interact with them and shared themselves with me. Although I will be leaving these walkways, corridors, and buildings soon, Spartan green has left its mark on all my shoes, and has immeasurably shaped my character.
Khoa Dang Truong

America! Where Am I?

- “Could I have a big bowl, a pair of chopsticks and some hot water?” I politely requested the hotel receptionist.
- “Excuse me! What do you need them for?” he responded with his unprecedented surprise, “I’m so sorry but we have only plates and forks for you.”

My hope to cook some Vietnamese instant noodles I brought along vanished, but three days of eating beef, bread and butter in Reno City, where I had a five-day Fulbright orientation at the Northern Nevada International Center (NNIC), instigated me to seek all the ways possible to have at least a little bit of Vietnamese food. “Do you know any Vietnamese diner near here?” I rushed out to the street so hastily that I forgot to thank the receptionist for showing me one. Numb with cold, ravenous, and lost among the dazzling skyscrapers, the strong me began to feel tears rolling down on my face, and the image of Mom with a bowl of steaming hot noodles in her hands turning up in hallucination. Back to the hotel at almost midnight, I devoured nearly three packs of noodles, uncooked, to my roommate’s consternation.

Only a few days before, putting a hand on my chest, I had heard my heart beating ceaselessly and telling me that I was flying to a dreamland of knowledge, glory, and wonders, when the United Airlines plane was heading into the dark sky just before the sun of August 15 came out from the horizon. Accompanying me were two suitcases with some clothes and necessities, but lots of belief, ambition, and the mission of a Fulbrighter. Congratulations, cheering, and necessarily tinges of envy had poured in from my friends and colleagues, who would hardly know inside of me was also a growing sense of angst over leaving my parents’ arms for a totally strange world – America. “Mom. Dad. Believe in me. I will never flinch!” I whispered to the window of the plane while the images of their sweat dropped in the paddy fields of the indigent woodland came flooding back to my mind.

As the last connecting flight was arriving, East Lansing emerged from the window of the plane, shining in the sunlight piercing the arbitrarily shaped masses of cloud. “I’m here to shine with
you”, I promised in silence. My first days in America were a bed of roses. I befriended a bunch of inspiring and outstanding people from many different countries, engrossing myself in the international climate where I honorably introduced my country’s unique values. Pride of being a Vietnamese Fulbrighter, a cultural ambassador, and very soon, a Spartan at Michigan State University made me feel like being on top of the world. However, then came a bed of ‘thorny’ roses – no end of down-to-earth encounters a woodlander like me had been unable to envisaged.

So eager was I on the first day there that I rode the ‘nineteen-century’ bike borrowed from a neighbor in Spartan Village all around to explore the university. While dreaming like in the fairy world, I heard from behind a curt, loud voice of anger, “Hey. What’s the matter with you? Wanna die?” The portly, middle-aged man with his rage went on, “Know I was almost hitting you?”, while approaching me. It turned out that I was walking my bike in the car park because I hadn’t seen any car parked there before. How could a woodlander like me know the parking rules here just on the first day? I embarrassedly said sorry to him many times, feeling like I had made an inexcusable mistake. I decided to go home in dismay, but unfortunately, I got lost a second time in the States, cycling around the interlacing roads of the huge campus without a sense of direction till the noontide.

Visiting the main library was one of the priorities in my to-do-list when I first came here. The honor of entering the 161-year-old university’s learning resource center, though I had weaved in and out between hundreds of book shelves, distracted me from feeling tired. There, I brought along a few documents to scan by the way. “Insert this card into the scanner over there and you can do it”, a busy staff at the copy center instructed me while not deigning to point at it. “Gracious! I’ve never known how to do this.” I groaned to myself. After observing it for almost five minutes without daring to touch any part, I shouted silently at the ‘sophisticated’ machine, “You and I should not be in the same age!” Though helpless and bewildered, I did not want to bring my embarrassed countenance to the staff to ask for help.

A few weeks earlier, I looked for a postal service to pass my friend’s gifts on to her former professors in Boston. I rummaged around on the Internet at MSU Union and got one 4.0 miles away from there, and the outcome was: I got lost a third time in the States! A postal service reception, while I was panting at the flight of steps after returning to the union, came into sight from the back of the hall. “Well, anyway…” I gave myself a consoling smile. There, a postal
worker with pepper-and-salt hair kindly guided me through all the steps of the postal process, and happened to ask, “Are you all set?” as I paid the postage. “Pardon? What do you mean? I’m all set? I’m not a machine.” I replied with enough astonishment. Peals of sympathetic laughter came from him and his nearby co-worker. I also burst out laughing with them for form’s sake despite being still in the dark about what was happening.

The other day, a group of young schoolgirls, as I was strolling at leisure around Okemos, turned up from afar. The nearer they got to me, the more blush they brought to my face. I could not, when accidentally seeing them jogging in their scanty undies, imagine how much embarrassment the self of Oriental extraction in me felt at that time. Over the twenty-eight years in my life I have got accustomed to the image of Vietnamese women, my mother and sister included, in their traditionally pleasing costumes. Trying to compose myself, I drew aside to let them through and covered my face with both hands at the same time but I still heard them giggling when they passed me. Quite some time later came a similar shocking experience to me in Wells Hall: A science professor wrapped up in lecturing was wearing his tee-shirt and brownish short when I glanced at his class out of the door. What went around in my head at that time was merely the smart image of Vietnamese teachers in their simple shirts tucked into their black trousers! I asked myself, “Am I in an educational environment?”

I still remember the first day I sat in Wells Hall’s A303, waiting for my first-ever class. Before that, I had learned about my professor, a distinguished teacher trainer in the Department of Linguistics and Languages, and tried to memorize her name very carefully. “Good afternoon, Dr. Winke”, I greeted her formally when she came in. She suggested, “Oh. Just call me Paula.” with a friendly smile. “Yes… H’m… But…” I nodded with reluctance. About one and a half hour later, I came to her desk to ask some questions during the break, and “Excuse me, Dr. Winke” came out of my mouth as naturally as I had always behaved with my former teachers. How could I address my respected teacher by her first name while I was bred in a country where such a way of greeting is seen as extremely rude and absolute respect for teachers who count as parents is an age-old norm? Actually, I had, prior to coming to the States, learned that informality is characteristic of the way American people communicate, but when it happened to me in reality, I could not explain why I completely failed to handle the awkward moment. Dear Dr. Winke: I wish I were able to call you “Paula” as my American classmates do!
My class ended a little bit late in the evening, say, at 7:30pm, when I felt that I could gobble an entire elephant up in one minute. I decided to drop by Starbucks to buy something to assuage my hunger. “Here is the store!” my growling stomach shouted gladly and induced me to go straight to the counter without bothering to care about anything around. “Snacks and white coffee, please!” I ordered hurriedly. Dumbfounded, the sellers did not say anything but they all looked at me as an alien when I was taking out my wallet and was ready to ask how much they were. Trying to take a grip on my hunger and look back, I faced a long line of nearly ten people standing in silence. “My God! So sorry.” was the only thing I could utter when an uncontrollable sense of shame urged me to flee from there as quickly as possible. Just back home, I threw a chicken thigh into the oven immediately and set the temperature at 200, hoping to have it after about 20 minutes. One hour fled away and I found a brutal truth: 200°F not 200°C as in my country. Holding the half-cooked chicken in my hand, I could only burst into tears like a child before feeling myself gradually collapsing onto the floor.

“America! Where am I?” - I have asked myself that question many times since I came to East Lansing, and every time I wonder whether I am still enduring enough to get over all the disheartening shocks to go all the way to the end of my academic program, the image of my beloved parents working strenuously in the flooded paddy fields reverts to my mind. I know that I am no longer a little child in their protective arms. I know that it was uneasy for me to earn this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study in this top-tier education system. I know what I should do as a Fulbright ambassador, a Spartan of Michigan State University, and a son of my Mom and Dad, who never failed to try their best to afford me education. And I know that it is the ups and downs that define me. If I had not got lost many times and faced difficulty with technology, I would not know American people are always willing to give their hands in the kindest-ever way. If I had not got into the traffic problem, I would not know the parking rules of this city. If I had not misinterpreted the native people’s language, I would not know how important real-life learning is for me, a language teacher. If I had not fallen into the embarrassing situations, I would not know what it takes to have tolerance for cultural differences. And if I had not shed tears as I felt helpless, I would not know I could independently regain my feet and continue stepping forward.

Now, every time I close my eyes I see my Dad crying for the first time in his life on the day I pulled away from the woodland village. Every time I look into my heart I see my Mom, small and bewildered among streams of people on the day I left her behind in tears of parting at the airport.
Time is fleeing away day by day, and I will never stop missing them whenever I see myself struggling as a lost woodlander in this modern world but am unsure of how I will get it through. Yet there is one thing I know for sure: I will eventually come back to my woodland hometown, strong and mature enough not to curl up in their arms any more but to be protective of them, and understanding enough to tell my fellow woodlanders who share the same dream of reaching out to the world the stories of how America made the different me!
As the autumn breeze through the azure sky, auburn tinted leaves descend in a tepid swirl unto the ground, one is reminded of the change in seasons. Just as summer is shifting to fall, I cannot help but am reminded of the parallels in life. My life took a massive diametrical shift just three months prior, when I moved to East Lansing. Moving to Michigan State University was a mixture of both excitement and sadness. Excitement for the anticipation of moving to a new state, a new city and starting a new life. People often talk about a new hope and new beginning when moving into a new city yet there is a part of me that is sad. Sadness because of the home that I left behind.

This is exacerbated by the fact of being an international student. In many ways, the sadness I experience was not so much about what I left behind, but more so the who I left behind. Over the years, I had built up many friends and an amazing community in my previous city. People that I shared life with, meet up regularly, and friends that I can talk to in my time of need. To comfort ourselves that we may never see each other again, we sometimes tell ourselves a lie. The lie we tell ourselves is that even though we are in new cities, we will always stay in touch, be best friends, and all the accompanying words to dull the pain. But the truth is that, the old adage “out of sight and out of mind” is probably more realistic than we really believe.

Therefore, coming here to MSU, was a little gut wrenching for me on a personal level. I have lost my support system, and I was sad in spite of all the hope and promise that came with moving to a new city. In some way, I adopted a ‘woe is me’ attitude as I approached life, yet I
sought to make new friends and build more relationships. As I got to know more students at college, I started to see life in a different way. It was a new beginning, there were glimmers of hope. Yet a deep longing remained: a need to connect, a need to belong, a need to have friends and be secure. There were days where despair would hit me because I have not been able to develop the level of deep friendships from the people I met.

However, I was determined to get myself out of this rut. To do this, I emphatically decide that I should spend more spare time exploring Michigan and the towns around. This led me to try different things like running on the River trail, climbing the Sleepy Bear dunes, hiking in Traverse City, kayaking down the Huron River. One of the things that I did particularly enjoyed was walks exploring the city of Lansing. On one of my walks in downtown Lansing, I met an older gentleman. Let’s just call him Michael for simplicity’s sake. Michael was a native of Michigan hailing from a city close to Saginaw. It was a curious interaction for me because he was a person that sought “help” and caught my attention that way. His clothes shed light on his state of being and the perils of the hand that life has dealt him. Typically, I would walk away, but I decided that today, I will talk to Michael. I believe that the worst thing that one human being can do to another is to ignore their presence – pretend that they do not exist.

I bought Michael a meal. We sat down and chatted and he told me about life. He rambled about how his parents divorced when he was young and his childhood was not one that he had many fond memories of. Michael shared about the things he did growing up, many of which he was not proud and the sufferings he endured having to work from a young age, while his friends were able to enjoy the finer things in life. I knew that for him life was not fair, but in his solemn storytelling, there was one thing that caught my attention above all else. Michael did not put the blame on others. Sure, he could blame his parents, or the government or all the things that went
wrong in his life. Yet he simply said, that his fate today was a culmination of all the choices that he had made. The good and bad decisions in life, he accepted them all. I asked if he had friends or family that he could go to, he said no. He said he was truly alone.

It was an odd emotional moment for me to process how someone is able to be resigned to the fate that he is experiencing. I felt immense compassion for Michael. It was difficult to even understand what it truly means to be “somewhat homeless” and in poverty. It must be terrible. I can only say it but yet in my head, I cannot fully comprehend the mental and emotional implications of what that means. I look at my situation in life in comparison and here I am complaining about how I have no friends and “suffering” in a new city as a stranger. Perspective can be a ruthless teacher. I have learned that there is so much I should be grateful for in life.

To walk a mile in another person’s shoes can be a difficult thing. We often compare ourselves to those that are in a better place than we are. How many of us compare ourselves to celebrities and wish we had their lifestyles? Yet, I doubt we compare ourselves to those that are in a worse place than we are. It’s all about the perspective, and I have learned to better understand others and be grateful for what life has to offer here.

My attitude has since improved; I still occasionally complain and am unhappy when things don’t go my way. Yet, when my thoughts stray that direction, I am reminded about the meal I shared with Michael. Life is an odd thing, and empathy is a great teacher. I feel blessed as an international student at MSU for the support that is available here, I am grateful for the friends that I am making and for all the tiny things that I often take for granted. Onward and Upward.