



Ekow Eshun

Identities and the subversion of borders

The search for home begins where we have arrived. By laying claim to a place, we find our identity and begin to change that of the world around us.

I was born in London in 1968, the same year that my father was abducted as a result of a coup in Ghana. My father was a Ghanaian diplomat. The military forces that took power in Ghana arrested him while he was in Guinea on a business trip. They "disappeared" him and put him in jail in Ghana for two years. My family in London had no idea where he was: my Mum was convinced he'd died while he was being held without word in prison. When I was two, there was a change of government, my Dad was released from jail, and the family moved back to Ghana. The family was reunited and I met my Dad for the first time. Three years later, in 1974, we were back in London.

We returned to what seemed to me a very strange place: the Britain where I'd been born and spent a couple of years seemed essentially a racist country where black footballers were spat at by their own fans, where programmes like *Love thy Neighbour* and the *Black and White Minstrel Show* were on TV. This country seemed to take race as its national pastime, or so it seemed to me at the time. When I was 11 years old, there was another coup in Ghana. My family lost our home, our car, most of our fixed possessions. Having lived through the consequences of those ups and downs, Ghana, even Africa itself, became a place bound up in my mind with turmoil and conflict, and it wasn't a place I ever wanted to go back to.

But at the same time, I found myself constantly being asked this question: "Where are you from?". This question always came accompanied with the follow up: "No, where are you *really* from?" As a consequence, it was a question I asked of myself too. And I always had trouble answering it. By way of illustration, here's a brief section from my book, *Black Gold of the Sun*, that describes some childhood experiences.

Some of my best friends were racists.

At Queensbridge Junior School there were no African children apart from the Eshuns. So far, I'd failed to run up with a bone through my nose, but collective wisdom amongst the members of class 3B held Africa to be a place of mud huts and cannibals. This from the same kids who conducted earnest debates on the best way to light farts and flick bogeys. To Greg O'Rourke, the aggressively freckled Jamie Brown, Benny Mitchell with his lazy eye, and the rest of 3B, England was an amalgam of Arthurian lore and Dunkirk spirit, predicated on the dominance of the white race over wogs, Pakis, and Yids. In the playground, they spread their arms wide like Spitfires,

ack-acking at the Hun while they chorused the theme tune to the Dambusters. It was their innocence that appalled me most. These were chubby-legged boys who burped like frogs over lunch. What did they know about giant snails or ants that could kill a tortoise? What did they know about Burma Camp? And if they didn't know, how could I begin to tell them? When my mind drifted off in the playground, I pictured beggars with rickets and kids my age with the swollen bellies that came from drinking contaminated water. I remember General Acheampong's face on television gleaming with sweat. So I said nothing, and they drew their own conclusions about me. I seemed to elicit a fascination in them. They patted my hair for springiness and pulled the coil straight to test its tensile strength. In the sunshine of an outdoor swimming lesson, the water shone iridescent on my skin. Sage words were exchanged on its seal-like consistency, and fingers pinched at my arms to see if I carried an extra layer of fat. Only my eyes and teeth would be visible in the dark they insisted, reaching for the light switch to test their theories. Eyes moist with compassion, Mrs O'Rourke bent towards me outside the school gates: "And what tribe are you from dear?" "I live on Beverly Drive, Mrs O'Rourke." "Yes, dear, but where are you *really* from?"

The question: "Where are you from?" has continued to recur throughout my life, and the trouble is, it's not an easy question to answer. My family is from Ghana but I was born in Britain. But that's only a partial answer and I realised not so long ago that the only way to address this question was to go back to Ghana; to try to piece together the parts of myself that felt as if they had been lost in this toing and froing across the Atlantic.

The subtitle of my book is *Searching for home in England and Africa*, and I suppose without fully realising it, this is what I have been doing for most of my life: searching for the elusive meaning of the word home. My journey back to Ghana in 2002 was a concrete attempt to find this. That journey was a very personal thing for me, but it is also in some respects a universal journey in Black culture. The return to Africa is there in Alex Haley's *Roots*, in the politics of Marcus Garvey, in Rastafarianism and in roots reggae. In all these, Africa stands out as a beacon of home of rootedness. I wanted to know if going back to Ghana — going "home" — could provide an alternative to living in Britain. If I returned to a familiar point of origin, of ancestral origin even, could I find myself and closure?

But I suspect I am not alone in asking myself these questions; in a city of 7 million such as London, people everywhere are asking themselves: "Where do I come from?" "Where do I belong?" It is, perhaps, a Modernist question related to the urban condition. But, above all, it has particular relevance for people from immigrant backgrounds, people who are part of a larger Diaspora. And implicit in the attempt to answer these questions is the sense of self-doubt; the constant assumption that somehow you don't really belong in this place because you are "really" from somewhere else.

So I travelled through Ghana, down the Atlantic Coast to the South and up as far as the dry, sub-Saharan North. I travelled physically, I travelled emotionally: I retraced my parents' lives and my grandparents' lives. And I travelled politically as I tried along the way to uncover the role this country

had played in the world.

Among other things, I noted that Ghana was the first independent country in sub-Saharan Africa. It became independent in 1957, ahead of anywhere else in sub-Saharan Africa. And in the 1960s, it became a fashionable place to hang out for African Americans who went there trying to find the bastion of black freedom. Louis Armstrong played a concert in the capital, Accra, before 100 000 people in 1956, and returned for another visit in 1960. Maya Angelou lived here. In 1962, Accra welcomed Malcolm X and Muhamad Ali on separate trips during the same week. All came hoping to find themselves and make sense of their own duality — to make sense of what it meant to live in a white country, of what might be involved in living in a black country.

For African-American activist WEB Dubois, it was the discovery of a newly independent Ghana, which he described as a beacon state standing against the imperialism of the West. He settled in Accra at the age of 93, surrendered his US passport, and became a Ghanaian citizen. When he died two years later, he was given a full state funeral with a eulogy delivered by President Kwame Nkrumah. Maya Angelou lived in Ghana for a year and found in it a place she could get in touch with her ancestors. She claimed she found Ghanaians who could have been descended from the same ancestors as her. Writing of that encounter, she described "the descendants of a pillaged past who saw their history in my face and descendants speak through my voice". Both Dubois and Angelou tell fairly conventional stories of return. Both found an idea of home. Their dream was met by a kind of reality.

This wasn't the case with another American traveller who went back to Africa. In 1953, Richard Wright, the author of *Native Son* and *Black Boy* — at one point the highest-selling black writer in US history — journeyed back to Ghana while the country was still under British rule and wrote a book about his trip called *Black Power*. I came across the book a while ago and it makes surprising reading, less for Wright's political analysis of a colonial state and more as a document of Richard's own psychological state. It's a strange book. One full of foreboding and dread and doom. And the further Wright travels through Ghana, the worse his sense of melancholy becomes. He goes to Kumasi in the centre of Ghana, where he goes to the market. He describes it as a maelstrom of men, women and children and vultures and stagnant water and flies and filth and foul odours. I've been to that market, it's not pretty, but it's not as bad as Wright made out.

I was interested in what was going on beneath the surface of his words. Because in Wright's description, nothing in Ghana seems to be safe. He sees a malign glint in the eye of a chief who takes him to dinner. He becomes sick at another dinner and suspects that he has been poisoned. At one point, he gatecrashes a funeral with a camera, starts to take pictures and is chased away by mourners with machetes. He says he is frightened for his life and flees the city. And, soon after, he flees the whole country. I was trying to understand what was going on. How much did Wright see of a physically unpretty place and how much of that sense of gloom was in his own head? He had a nightmarish time in Ghana that pitched him into a depression, a paranoia in fact, that recurred throughout the remaining years of his life. He died young, aged 52, in Paris from heart failure less than a decade after that melancholy trip.

I can't help seeing Wright's trip and his response to what Ghana was as a metaphor for heartbreak. I think he went to Africa looking for a place that

would be the spiritual home he hadn't found in America or Paris where he had finally moved to from New York. And he didn't find it: he found something else that he describes as squalid and unsatisfactory. I suspect his death from heart failure, metaphorically at least, was death of heart-break. For it seems to me that this is one of the things that can happen when you remain frustrated in the search for home.

These were the questions I was asking myself as I travelled through Ghana. Why is it so important to go in search of home? What lies at the bottom of that sensibility? I suppose I wanted to pare away the Alex Haley notion of "homecoming-ness". Certainly Wright's version of events didn't match that. And what I discovered in truth was something less straightforward than a fixed, rooted return.

As I traced my mother's family back seven generations into the past, I discovered that an ancestor of mine, seven generations ago in the eighteenth century, was called Joseph Degraft. He was white, came from Holland, and arrived in Ghana sometime in the 1750s. Joseph lived there for a number of years, married an African woman, and had a son, also called Joseph. Joseph the son took up the family business of Joseph the father. Both of them, I found out, were slave traders. This was not what I was expecting. What I discovered in Ghana was the opposite of simplicity, the opposite of closure. I found that the truth of history isn't straightforward. If you go searching for things, if you go searching for a fixed thing, if you go searching for an answer, you often end up with more questions.

I wanted to understand the context in which my ancestors had become slave traders. I did some research and discovered that in eighteenth-century Ghana, in the Ashanti region, which was the size of modern-day Ghana, one-third of the population were slaves. Ghana had a thriving domestic slave trade long before the arrival of Europe: Africans sold other Africans to each other. Slaves worked the fields and the gold mines. Slaves worked in the military and the bureaucracy. Slaves essentially built pre-colonial Ghana. In fact, the economies of many parts of Ghana were so founded on a slave economy that when Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807, the King of the Ashanti protested so strongly that slavery was allowed to remain legal in Ghana until the 1870s.

My discoveries fairly set my mind spinning. It seemed to me that, at the very least, there was a deep irony to them. By supporting the development of slavery as an international system, by selling black slaves to Europe, men like my ancestors allowed Europe to establish its myths of racial superiority. The moral justification for slavery was that Blacks were genetically inferior to Whites and this remains woven through white prejudice towards black people today and you can hear it rooted in sitcoms like *Love thy neighbour*. Far from getting away from that concept by going to Ghana, as I had imagined, I found myself at its very core. The same otherness, the same duality that I grew up with and went to Ghana to find a release from, turned out to have been originally established by people like my mixed race ancestors, by people like the King of the Ashanti, who sold black people for a profit to white people without examining the consequences of their actions.

This was unwelcome news. But there is a further irony: that race as a biological characteristic doesn't exist. There is a difference in phenotype, in skin colour, between different sets of people, but genetically speaking race doesn't exist. There is less genetic material in common between two white

people from neighbouring countries than between a white person and a black person. Race was invented in the nineteenth century in part as a means of proving the superiority of white people over black people. And there is no truth at all in this. They are as tangled and troubled, as good and bad as anyone else. And that, I suppose, is really the point of all this. If you go searching for roots, if you go searching for home, you have to be prepared to accept that what you find may not be glorious or spiritually ennobling. It may instead be contradictory or surprising or, in fact, quite ordinary.

At the start of his book *The Black Atlantic*, writer and sociologist Paul Gilroy draws an image of an Atlantic Ocean crisscrossed with wake lines frozen in time from the toings and froings of ships going between Africa, Europe, and the New World over the centuries. I have always thought it a telling notion, a beautiful image that reminds me that Africa has never been unconnected to the West in trade or culture. There has always been this toing and froing. So even when you go to Africa, as I did, seeking home, it turns out that there isn't purity there. It turns out that history is predicated on miscegenation, culturally and racially, in all sorts of ways. In the end, that realisation forms the path to a particular form of freedom, because to understand this is to acknowledge that identity isn't determined by singularity, by blood or history or point of origin. It's determined by choice.

When I came back to Britain at the end of my trip, I realised that I'd not only been posing the question "Where you are from?" all my life, I'd actually been answering it through my actions. Not through a necessity to find another place, but through how I lived everyday. I think the same is true for any black person or person of immigrant origin who lives in Britain. I think by choosing to stay in Britain, by doing nothing more, by not moving away, as we could at any moment, we say this is where I am from. We have the answer to "Where are you from?"

Being here, and choosing to be here, comes with obligations. It means we have a responsibility to make our voice heard in order to ensure that we are recognised and represented in the culture. It also means that by virtue of being ourselves, Britain itself changes — in its music, its food, its clothes, its way of understanding itself. Britain moves closer to us. It comes to look more like us. It comes to act more like us. This is how we find home: by laying claim to the place around us. By understanding that who we are isn't simply an amalgam of circumstance. By understanding that the search for home needs to begin right here. And reality is more complicated but potentially more fruitful if we can ultimately understand this. Which is to say that, in the words of the great rap duo Erin and Rakim: when it comes to seeking an answer about home, "it ain't where you are from that matters, it's where you are at that counts".

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