

This is Why I'm Black

By Abena A.- Green

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I still have a hard time answering when people ask where I'm from. In the moments between their question and my calculated response, I try to figure out what exactly they mean. They could mean 'Where do you live?', 'Where were you raised?', or 'Why are you black?' After a comment from this Zambian guy a few weeks ago, I decided it was time to make peace with this question and with people's reactions to my response.

Depending on the situation and who's asking, I respond to "Where are you from?" differently. If I'm in another province, I'll say Nova Scotia. If I'm in Nova Scotia, I'll either say Halifax or name my tiny town. If I'm overseas, I'll say I'm from Canada. But with all of these I've run into problems.

In Nova Scotia I've had people, black and white, tell me either directly or insinuate that I'm not really from Nova Scotia. During an internship in Rwanda, the driver at work couldn't understand how I was a Canadian but had dark skin and West African features. He had relayed his bewilderment to another Canadian intern who told me this. The funny thing is, she was Indian-Canadian. In most places, people don't accept 'Canada' as a satisfactory answer. They want to know why I'm black. I'm proud that the reason for my blackness is because of my Ghanaian roots. For many people (mostly older generations or from other countries), when I tell them my parents are from Ghana, they say "Ooohhh, okay, you're from Ghana!!" In a way, I think to myself. Not really. It depends.

I was neither born nor raised in Ghana but am connected to it. Most of my family is there and I've spent a lot of time there. Besides, my siblings and I are only one generation removed so it's not like it's some distant land of unknown ancestors. As children, when we told strangers that our parents were from Ghana, our parents would laugh and say, "And where do you think you're from?" as if to say, you think you're *from* Canada or only from Canada? But many people, including other Africans, have different opinions. "You're not from Ghana! You're a Canadian!" They proclaim as if uncovering a secret hidden under my Ghanaian features. This was the Zambian guy's declaration.

However, when I tell some African people that I'm from "here" meaning Canada, they'll say just as strongly "Hey, don't forget you're an African too!" Each side finds it their responsibility to make sure I'm clear about what, in their opinion, I am or am not. So which is it?

Well I realized that a lot of the problem might be in linguistics, in the distinction between *from* and being (*fill in nationality here*)-ian. So taking that into consideration, here's what it is. I'm Canadian. Born in Alberta, raised in Nova Scotia. And I'm Ghanaian. I'm Ghanaian because my parents are Ghanaian and they passed that to my siblings and I obviously through genetics, and also by making sure we visited, knew our relatives, the language, culture, and through their influence of being their Ghanaian selves. Sure, maybe the Zambian guy and the rest on his team are right. I am not *from* Ghana in the sense that I didn't grow up there, but I can't deny the role it plays in who I have become. And I won't allow others to either.

I've also concluded that I needn't be ashamed that I'm not "more Ghanaian". Who I am is more than enough. I take an interest in Ghanaian affairs and culture because it's important to me. I know other children and grandchildren of immigrants in Canada take the same stance. They can't help being Canadian, but also wave the flags of their countries of origin proudly. Some stay connected through the communities they live in, or by volunteering for cultural organizations. Some attend every party. Others keep up with the news. But one thing is for certain: If we rely on other's opinions of who we are, we'll be confused as ping pong balls.

So when people ask where I'm from, I'll no longer get antsy trying to figure out what they want to hear. Nor will I offer my life story to satisfy them. The answer will most likely have something to do with this land of maple leaves but believe me, I'll always have my black star waving.

Abena A. Green is a freelance writer, poet, dancer and co-founder of [Tempo Magazine](#), a publication that celebrates the contributions Africans of all backgrounds are making to re-define the future of the continent.