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## In Between Lines: An Investigation of the Ghanaian Migration Experience

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In Between Lines: An Investigation of The  
Ghanaian Migration Experience

Teddy Osei

Springfield Art Museum

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## **Acknowledgment**

My utmost gratitude goes out to my wife and family as they have been an incredible support system through my academic journey and stay in the United States of America. Even through the most challenging times, they have been my rock and I am forever grateful for their sacrifices, efforts, and the words of wisdom that have made me who I am today. I also want to express my sincere appreciation to all the Professors at the Department of Art + Design at Missouri State University, who in one way or another impacted my life through their teachings and words of wisdom. My sincere thanks go out to my committee members Professor Kevin Hughes, Professor Amanda Smith, and Professor Sarah Williams. I could not have come this far without your support, mentorship, and guidance which have been priceless contributions to my success, and I am forever grateful for everything. Finally, I thank my friends in the international community as they have always been my family away from home and greatly contributed to my academic success.

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# **IN BETWEEN LINES: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE GHANAIAN MIGRATION**

## **EXPERIENCE**

Art and Design Department

Missouri State University, May 2023

Master of Fine Arts

Teddy Osei

## **ABSTRACT**

As my socio-cultural experiences continue to evolve, so does my interest in contemporary border discourses. The question of "who qualifies to be where and how," lingers in my mind daily as I reflect on my migration experience as a Ghanaian living in the United States of America. Another area of interest is the social and physical challenges endured by individuals transitioning from one geographic location to another. In replicating these experiences, I make ceramic sculptural vessels associated with sojourning. In my ceramic sculptures, I use specific elements, such as ropes and Ghana must-go bags, which honor Africa's past and its people in an attempt to recognize its migration history. The rope also serves as a metaphor that reflects the interconnectedness of our collective history, while its strong materiality speaks to the resilience of African people. These elements represent the displacement of Africans from their homeland and their journey to different parts of the world. By incorporating these elements into my sculptures, I bring attention to the history of African migration and the struggles of African people throughout history. Furthermore, through the lens of geocultural perspectives, I explore how these forms can speak to impermanence and migration's cyclical nature. In addition, I am particularly interested in expressing the experience of being between two cultures, a world that is both familiar and foreign to me. Throughout my work, I explore the complex relationship between people and their environment, the impact of cultural diversity, and the challenges of living in a multicultural society. I also utilize my work to convey all these experiences and help others reflect on these issues through the lens of my work.

**KEYWORDS:** ceramics, culture, contemporary, migration, mixed-media, sculpture

**IN BETWEEN LINES: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE GHANAIAN MIGRATION**

**EXPERIENCE**

By

Teddy Osei

A Master's Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate College  
Of Missouri State University  
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May 2023

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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## Introduction

According to Michele Lamont et al, human history is closely tied to the concept of borders, and its use reflects the rise of civilizations<sup>1</sup>. They further assert that this concept has evolved throughout history, and borders have evolved according to the trends associated with each period. Europeans coined the modern term “border,” in the 17th century; they determined that borders are continuous territorial lines marking the outer limits of a state's authority and a key foundation for the principle of sovereignty in the international system<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, it can also be speculated that the notion of a geographic border is generally understood as a natural or artificial boundary separating two or more geographic areas. Although physical features such as mountains, rivers, or coastlines, demarcate a border's boundaries, they can also be established by human action, such as the construction of fences, walls, or other structures<sup>3</sup>. Borders can also serve as a prominent symbol of a country's identity, often likened to the skin of a living organism in common analogy. In context, borders can be delineated as physical, psychological, and physiological barriers forming a part of the overall geographical and cultural border system<sup>4</sup>. Historically, the term cultural border has connoted the construction of a barrier by a more powerful side to protect its political power, cultural knowledge, and privileges.<sup>5</sup> More so, this concept could also be referred to as some cultural difference in all human societies, whether traditional or modern.

Exploring how geographical and cultural borders are created and the power dynamics that form these decisions intrigues me. I am interested in exploring borders as limits and dividing lines that create a distinction between two spaces or entities. As a result, understanding the nuances of how borders are built and how they affect people's lives is an

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<sup>1</sup>Lamont et al., “Cultural and Moral Boundaries in the United States,” 31-56

<sup>2</sup>Maria Baramova, "Border Theories in Early Modern Europe," 2-6.

<sup>3</sup> National Geographic Society, Boudreau et al., s.v. “Border.”

<sup>4</sup> National Geographic Society, Boudreau et al., s.v. “Border.”

<sup>5</sup> Kristi Hakkinen. 1998. "Multicultural Education: Reflection on Theory and Practice." *Selected papers from the International Conference on Multicultural Education*.

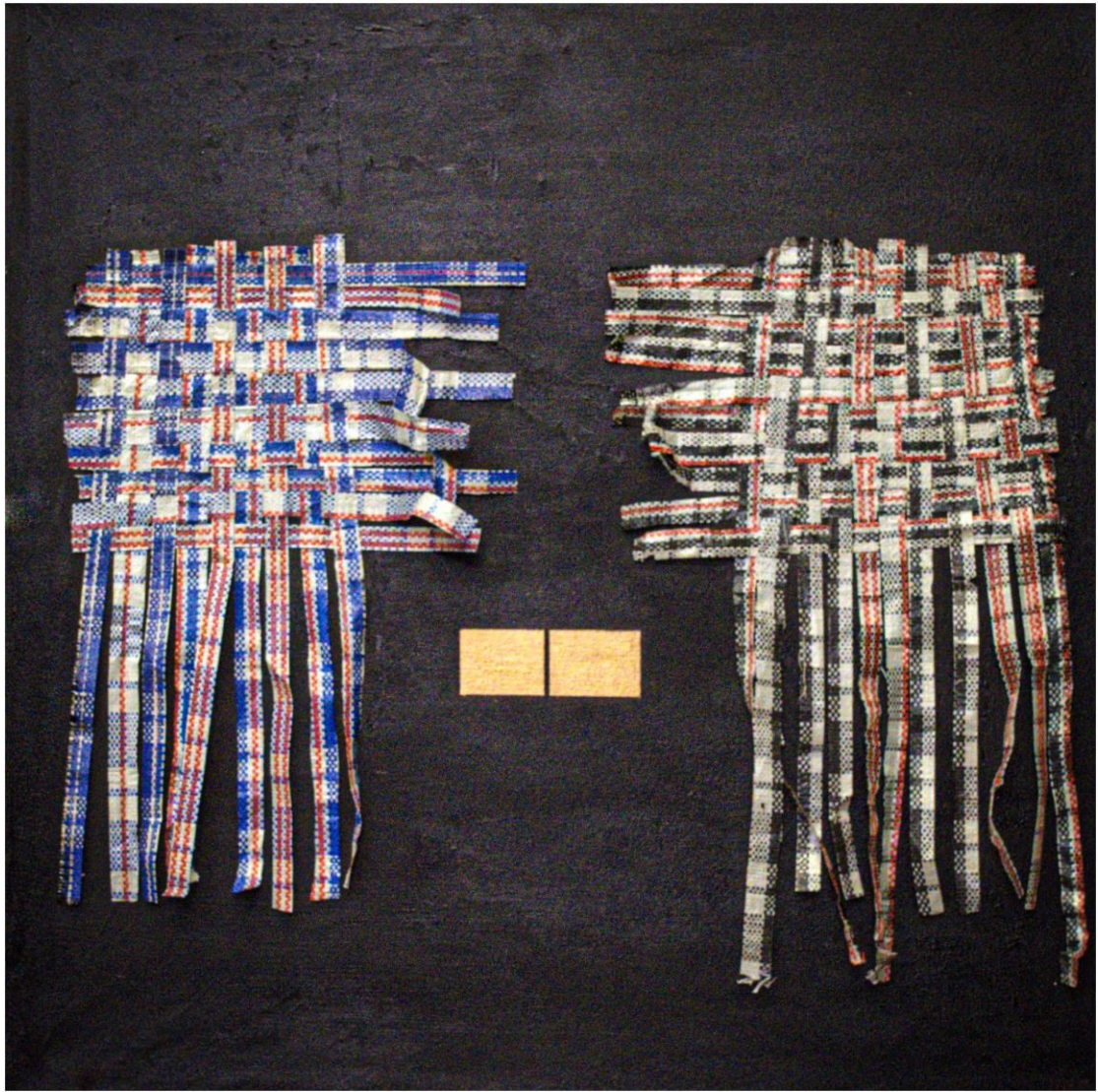
important part of engaging with global and social issues. My work investigates the implications of crossing such a boundary and how it transforms you. It also highlights how migrants' identities and self-perception are shaped by their complex and multifaceted experiences. create sculptural ceramic vessels that evoke a sense of movement and transformation by altering the base of my form.

In addition to exploring the relationship between these forms and materials, I also capture moments of change and growth through my work. My work's tactile surfaces and forms explore the intersection of identity, culture, and history. I integrate distinctive elements like ropes and Ghana must-go bags; by combining these elements I create a narrative that reflects both my own experiences and those of others. To explore these concepts, I create sculptural ceramic vessels that evoke a sense of movement and transformation by altering the base of my form.

As I explore these themes, I draw a visual parallel with contemporary artists like Doris Salcedo, whose work addresses the impact of social injustice and political violence on communities and individuals. Salcedo's work uses a collection of everyday objects and materials to create a visual metaphor that connotes loss, resilience, and mourning.

The artist Ai Weiwei is another artist whom I draw inspiration from in exploring these themes, as his installations and sculptures address issues of migration, censorship, and the sole role individuals play within societies. In comparison with my work and the works of these artists, I explore the intricate nature of identity and how it relates to our recollections as I navigate my present and search for a sense of belonging. In my work, I provide a space for dialogue and understanding of contemporary border discourses, and complexities, as well as the transformation that comes with crossing borders. As a way of creating a platform for contemplation, my work engages viewers and encourages critical thinking and introspection on these themes, as it offers an opportunity to celebrate our collective heritage.





*Connecting to the other side*, 2022, acrylic paint, Ghana must-go bags, and gold leaf paint.  
34" x 34"

## **The Ghanaian Migration and Displacement Experience**

Ghana has experienced waves of migration and displacement. During the mid-part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ghana experienced high economic and political instability owing to the struggle for independence in 1957<sup>6</sup>. Post-independence, between the period after 1957 to 1967, the government of Ghana, sought ways to re-stabilize the economy as there had been multiple attempts of coup d'etat. After a successful progression of re-stabilizing the economic and political systems of Ghana, the government-initiated policies to help in practicing democracy and help absorb the educated and non-educated youth population into the working sector of the economy<sup>7</sup>. Although these policies were enacted and are yet to be initiated, they still didn't deter me from moving from Ghana to the United States to access a different kind of educational system. When I first arrived in the United States, I was overwhelmed by the pace of study and development in all sectors of the economy. As I began comprehending the educational system, I realized my accent made it more difficult for my colleagues and professors to understand what I was articulating verbally. The only way I could channel how I felt at that moment was to visually create ceramic sculptural forms and paintings that spoke to my current sociocultural experience as a migrant.

I began this process by interviewing and questioning international students going through similar experiences. Surprisingly, I realized I was not "the only one in that boat." After several successful interviews and interrogations, I headed to my studio and started painting and sculpting simultaneously. I began to make meaningful connections as I collaged different materials onto a stretched canvas's surface. Although some materials I used in making these paintings did not belong on their surfaces, it was a metaphor for how I felt in my current sociocultural space. In my making process, I borrow visual inspiration from, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, an artist whose painting interrogates the complexities of cultural

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<sup>6</sup> Senam Awo Okudzeto, "Ghana Must Go," 35

<sup>7</sup> Senam Awo Okudzeto, "Ghana Must Go," 35

hybridity. In her paintings, she collages images and patterns from her Nigerian and American migration experiences. Another artist who helped me in understanding how I was feeling at that moment was Yinka Shonibare, as his sculptures also explore themes of migration, colonialism, and cultural identity by combining African and European cultural elements. These expressions not only spoke to how I was feeling at that moment but also became a channel through which I could connect to my family back home. As part of layering and preparing the surface of the canvas for collaging, I draw a parallel between that process with how my university professors always encouraged me to study outside of Ghana to broaden my opportunities as an artist. At that moment, each brush stroke on the surface of the canvas was synonymous with their voice being re-echoed repeatedly. As I started juxtaposing materials such as rope, printed text conversations with friends, and Google search images on the surface of the canvas, I was intrigued by how it can be seen as a metaphor for the process of cultural adaptation that many migrants undergo. As I began to reflect on how these paintings contribute to a broader cultural conversation about the challenges and opportunities of migration, it became a channel through which I could comprehend empathy along with social and cultural change.



*Untitled (Left Side View)*, 2023, stoneware, black glaze, Ghana must-go bags, and gold paint. 14" x 10" x 10"

## **The Intersection of Cultures: A Cross-Cultural Narrative between Ghana and the United States of America**

I grew up in the capital of Ghana, a space that is made up of different ethnic and cultural groups. I began to appreciate and celebrate diversity at a very young age, as my socio-cultural space was populated by different people. Cultural and ethnic diversity was the kind of “gospel” my mother and father nurtured me with, the idea that “irrespective of your socio-cultural or socio-political background we are all one people”. This ideology became my mantra, as I kept finding myself in different spaces that had a wide range of people from different backgrounds. This was no different than when I transitioned from Ghana to the United States. Experiencing a more diverse social group was an eye-opening experience as it gave me the opportunity to interact with diverse people from different cultural backgrounds. There is a profound adage that says, “To every rule, there is an exception.” As much as I was very vested in my cultural heritage, I was torn between two paths. As I kept enjoying my new cultural space, I did not realize how it was also exerting a kind of indirect influence on how I think, speak, and act. Homi Bhabha's theory on cultural hybridity, which contends that cultures are not static and homogenous but rather complex and dynamic, was immediately apparent at that time.<sup>8</sup> Bhabha further contends that cultural identities are frequently produced through hybridization and creolization.<sup>9</sup>

As a way of helping me in navigating this new space, I began working on sculptural ceramic vessels that celebrated my Ghanaian identity and embraced my newfound sociocultural space. These forms had a strong visual reference to what I experienced in my formative and adult years in Ghana while highlighting my experiences within the United States of America. In making these sculptural vessels, I drew a cultural parallel between how Ghanaians and Americans use the body as a symbol of identity, as well as social and cultural

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<sup>8</sup> Anthony Easthope, "Homi Bhabha," 145-151.

<sup>9</sup> Nasrullah Mambrol, "Homi Bhabha's Concept of Hybridity."

expression. I have had the chance to witness and admire the various cultures and physical forms of the human body in other nations because I was born in Ghana and now reside in the United States.

I have taken note of how these cultures use adornments and other surface decorations, such as body art and jewelry, to communicate cultural identity along with social and individual values. In Ghana, people frequently adorn their bodies with jewelry, tribal markings, and other ornaments that express their individual religious, cultural, and regional identities. In contrast, the body is frequently viewed in the United States as a medium for individual expression. Through my artistic investigation, I have been able to comprehend the significance of the body as a symbol of identity and its function in the construction of culture through my investigation. In Ghana, body adornment is a way to show respect for tradition and honor the ancestors. In the United States, body adornment is a way to express one's unique style and individualism. Both cultures use body adornment to communicate who we are and where we come from.

My work is meant to be playful and engaging, provoking viewers to consider the implications of their own identities on their lives and learning how to understand the world in a deeper, more meaningful way. By representing the aspect of my cultural world through a lens of playfulness and curiosity, the work encourages people to question and challenge the status quo. It encourages us to look beneath the surface and consider the ways our identity affects not just how we perceive the world, but how the world perceives us.



*Untitled (Front View)*, 2023, stoneware, black glaze, Ghana must-go bags, and gold paint. 14" x 10" x 10"

## **Adjusting to a New Culture: My Journey From Ghana into the United States of America**

There is always a thin line between trying to adjust and trying to exist within a given space, this was something I grappled with when I left my home country for the United States of America. The United States seemed like a bottomless ocean, and I was like a pinch of salt in the midst of it. Everything was fast and swift and in order to catch up I had to swim at the pace of what was happening. I had to learn how to deal with the varied types of cuisine, the extreme weather conditions, and other aspects of a new culture and way of life. Ghanaian family structures are close-knit while I observed that the American family structure favors more individualism. Due to the absence of strong communal links, I felt alone and isolated. I missed the warmth and intimacy of my family because we lived in such a close-knit town. Yet the wonderful times in the United States of America weren't enough to make me feel like I belonged. Despite my best efforts, I was unable to create the same level of emotional support within the community that I had grown accustomed to. It was difficult for me to adjust to these events because each day had its own challenges. Yet, with a lot of perseverance and fortitude, I was able to go forward. It is true that every coin has two sides, and my adaptation and adjustment process were no different. The relatives and friends I have made in this new setting have helped me forge solid bonds.

My new sociocultural environment not only facilitated meaningful interactions but also cultivated several facets of my life that I had never given much thought to. In Ghanaian society, speaking out for oneself wasn't always encouraged, but I learned how to do it. I also felt that I understood the diverse cultures and points of view I encountered in the United States of America. I met people from all around the world and learned fresh perspectives on life. Despite all these experiences, finding freedom and joy in my own growth and accomplishments as an artist was the most important thing for me and I got to discover this through my adaptation process.





*Touch One Another*, 2023, stoneware, black glaze, Ghana must-go bags, and gold paint.  
13" x 10" x 10"

## **Mass Exodus: Historical Context of Ghana Must Go Bags**

The iconic name Ghana-must go was derived from how Ghanaians moved to Nigeria in search of a better economic opportunity in the early 1970s.<sup>10</sup> These bags gained prominence during a time of diplomatic turmoil between Nigeria and Ghana in the 1980s when Ghanaians used them to transport their goods as they were forcibly removed from Nigeria.<sup>11</sup> A complicated combination of economic, political, and cultural issues led to Nigeria's enormous expulsion of immigrants from West Africa. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Nigeria's economy saw a boom that attracted immigrants from neighboring countries including Ghana, Togo, and the Ivory Coast. Sadly, by the late 1970s, Nigeria's economy had worsened due to the country's high immigration rate, leading to significant unemployment and social unrest.<sup>12</sup> The Nigerian government responded by implementing a number of policies meant to reduce the number of foreigners residing there. These regulations included limitations on employment prospects, increased costs for work permits and residence visas, and requirements that non-Nigerians carry identification cards<sup>13</sup>. When the Nigerian government issued an order to expel all illegal immigrants—the bulk of whom were Ghanaians—in 1983, the situation reached a crisis point. Their departure date was fixed for January 1, 1984. Intimidation, violence, and property seizures were used to enforce the policy, which resulted in chaotic situations as thousands of individuals attempted to escape the country. Several of the Ghanaians who were kicked out of Nigeria transported their possessions in sizable, hard-wearing bags manufactured of polypropylene. As a result of the message the Ghana government conveyed to the Nigerian government requesting that its nationals be permitted to return home, the Nigerian polypropylene transport bags quickly earned the nickname Ghana Must Go. The bags themselves came to represent the horrific

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<sup>10</sup> Shola Lawal, "GHANA MUST GO: The ugly history of Africa's most famous bag."

<sup>11</sup> Senam Awo Okudzeto, "Ghana Must Go," 35

<sup>12</sup> Diana Olaleye, "Ghana Must Go: Containing the Mayhem of #Migration."

<sup>13</sup> Amanda McGowan, "Iconic 'Ghana Must Go' Bag Gets Refashioned."

experience of forced migration and the phrase Ghana Must Go grew to be synonymous with the mass expulsion of people from Nigeria. Ghana Must Go bags, with their distinctive pattern, have nonetheless become a cultural icon in West Africa despite their negative implications.

This historical narrative is something that informs my work. I remember growing up as a child my mother packed all our clothing and belongings in these bags as we traveled. My mother's constant use of the Ghana must-go bag in relation to our movement from one place to another helped me understand how these bags became an ideal form of luggage for many people in West Africa, and how they have become a part of the cultural identity of the region. As many individuals in West Africa attach personal and sentimental value to the bags, they serve as a reminder of a trying and stressful time in Ghana's history. Others see them as a link to their heritage and cultural origins as they transition from one place to another. Since many West Africans continue living their lives despite hardship, they have also come to represent resistance and resiliency.



*Equal-Halves*, 2023, stoneware, black glaze, Ghana must-go bags, and gold paint.  
9" x 11" x 11"

### **Gourd Fruit: A Symbol of Sojourning**

The gourd fruit has a symbolic representation of sojourning or traveling in specific cultures in Africa as it is used for lengthy treks in many African societies. According to Camino De Santiago, the gourd fruit has been used by pilgrims in some specific cultures to store water, wine, and other liquid substances.<sup>14</sup> Humans have employed the hard-shelled gourd fruit, also known as the calabash, for thousands of years for several uses. Moreover, it is employed in the production of musical instruments like the shekere, a percussion instrument formed by wrapping beads or shells around a hollow gourd. Traditional African music frequently employs the shekere to establish rhythm and support dancers. The gourd fruit is a representation of wandering in many other civilizations besides Africa. The gourd is used in Native American civilizations to make rattles and water containers. The gourd is a lucky charm that is frequently utilized in Chinese culture to ward off evil spirits. It is a significant emblem in many religious traditions. The Christian Bible refers to the gourd as a plant that quickly grew and gave Jonah shade when he was wandering in the desert. Hinduism links the gourd to the god Ganesh, who is frequently seen holding one in his palm.

The gourd fruit, in general, is a profound symbol of sojourning and traveling in many different cultures all over the world. The gourd serves as a constant reminder of the value of being ready for the road ahead and being connected to our cultural traditions while doing so, whether it is being used to carry water, make music, or ward off evil spirits. As part of using the gourd fruit as a metaphor in my work, I am particularly interested in exploring the idea of the continuous journey of humans and how this affects our identity. This idea is further explored in a visually engaging way using ceramic sculptural forms that represent movement and are precarious in nature. By adding Ghana must-go bags, which make a connection to the migrant experience and stress the sense of migration, I take this idea a step further. The

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<sup>14</sup> Camino De Santiago, "The symbolism of the pilgrim gourd."

distinctive nature of my forms' shapes and fluidity symbolize the unpredictability of life's path. It represents how our identity is shaped by the ups and downs, twists, and turns of the human journey. The incorporation of Ghana must-go bags gives the sculptures an additional degree of significance by representing the hardships and sacrifices associated with migration. The difficulties and emotional burden of leaving one's home to begin a new life elsewhere are highlighted by the Ghana must-go baggage. My ceramic sculpture forms and Ghana must-go bags combine to produce a visual metaphor that conveys the essence of humankind's ongoing journey and how it affects our identity. It calls attention to the migrant experience and the challenges associated with travel and migration while also provoking reflection on the viewer's own journey.



*Whispers*, 2023, stoneware, black glaze, colored pigments, Ghana must-go bags, and gold paint. 15" x 10" x 10"

### **Rope as a Metaphor**

In the context of migration, rope might represent the voyage itself, the mental and physical hardships associated with leaving one's home and moving to a new location. For many migrants, the voyage is fraught with uncertainty, risk, and danger; the metaphor of the rope can be used to convey how challenging this journey can be. Each strand of the rope can symbolize a different element of the migration process, from the initial decision to leave home, to the physical journey, to the challenges of adapting to a new environment. Together, the strands represent the interconnectedness of these different experiences and the interconnectedness of people's experiences of migration. The weaving of the strands is a metaphor for how I was able to take many different experiences and create something new and meaningful.

My experience moving from Ghana to the United States of America has been both an opportunity for personal growth and a challenge at the same time. I have had to learn to adjust to new surroundings and customs while also trying to maintain my own culture and traditions. Additionally, the language barrier has been difficult to overcome, but I have grown from the experience and learned a lot about myself and the world around me. This process has been not only physical but also psychological, involving adaptation to a new environment, learning the language, understanding the culture and the customs, and making new friendships. Through these experiences, I was able to immerse myself in a new environment, learn the language, and get an understanding of the culture.



*Three Strand Chord*, 2023, stoneware, black glaze, colored pigments, Ghana must-go bags, and gold paint. 10" x 11" x 11".

## **The Grass is Never Green on the Other Side**

One of the profound folktales that were propagated by my mother during my formative years about the Western world always ended with the moral that “the Western world was a place full of gold and silver.” This folktale reflected the collective imagination of the society in which my family existed at the time. It was also a way to give people who were thinking of migrating a sense of optimism and to provide them with a vision of the potential rewards of leaving their home countries behind. It was a message of hope, a reminder that they could find a better life in the Western world if they were willing to take the risk. A few years before I came to the United States, I read an article about the influx of migrants to Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. As asserted in this article, everyone had sold all their belongings and entrusted the proceeds of the sales to a middleman who promised to take them into these countries by crossing the desert. As I reflected on the loss and death of these people against the ones that survived, the baseline of this voyage became very glaring. The article highlighted the fact that the people who made this journey were desperate for a better life and were willing to go to extreme lengths and risk their own lives to make it happen. In the end, many of them faced tragedy due to the harshness of the journey, while some were able to make it to their destination and find a better life. In as much as these experiences are the reality of some migrants, I was on the other side of the coin in terms of my experiences. I entered the United States through legal means and went through all the formalities as an international student. This allowed me all the necessary documents to work and travel in the US. It also afforded me the opportunity to access certain social services that are available to international students. Months after I had settled in the United States of America, I got to understand that life is not as rosy as some of these stories and media propagated. It was worth noting that every day came with its own hurdle, and it takes a level of mental and physical fortitude to be able to scale each hurdle. From the ever-growing cost of living to the lack of job opportunities, I quickly realized that life in the United States of America was not as easy



as I thought it would be. It has taken me a long time to adjust to the cultural differences, the language barrier, and the overall challenges of living in a new country.

During this period, I encountered people in my home country asking questions about how to travel and trying to get some financial assistance from my end. The pandemic had caused a lot of economic hardship for many people, and many were seeking ways to make ends meet. My home country, Ghana had also been severely impacted by the pandemic, so I was approached by people from all walks of life who needed help. In my quest to navigate these social pressures and help in rewriting a perverse narrative, I began thinking about how from a very young age, we have been psyched up by what we hear, see, and watch. This social conditioning often leads to unrealistic expectations and a distorted view of reality. It can lead to feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and a lack of confidence in our own abilities. These socioeconomic situations have rendered my day-to-day contemplations quite unstable, as I have a constant urge to perceive my existence outside the borders of Africa. My ceramic sculptures are designed in such a way that speaks to the insatiable desire to seek something that is far fetched. This desire is born out of a sense of displacement and longing to find a place of belonging, which is often connected to a need for stability, both emotionally and materially. The ceramic sculptures are an attempt to bridge the gap between past and present and to create a tangible connection to the present. My ceramic sculptures explore the idea that migration is not simply a linear experience but can involve multiple, often interconnected, loops around the same themes of home and belonging, I am also interested in using imagery and symbolism to capture both the physical and emotional aspects of migration.



*Untitled (Right-Side View)*, 2023, stoneware, black glaze, Ghana must-go bags, and gold paint. 14" x 10" x 10"

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