“You’ve turned into one of them!” they exclaimed. Confounded, I paused to think. The last time I checked, I had not been bit by a vampire or infected by a zombie. I was still the same Shawn Ohazuruike with all my extremities intact. Maybe I had grown a couple of inches and they were commenting on my height; however, their condemnatory expressions proved otherwise. I didn’t transform into an infamous murderer, or vengeful villain. Yet in their eyes, I did.

Growing up in Newark, NJ to two Nigerian immigrants, I sought to one day alleviate the financial burden they worked so hard to overcome. However, living in Newark occasionally served as a hurdle that proved difficult to maneuver over. Driven to overcome the hurdle, I made it my purpose to break from the concrete bounds of Newark to find success elsewhere. Limits were pushed. Risks were taken. Eventually, I found my exodus through a private school in Morristown, New Jersey. Well, I guess you can say, “I did it!” Cue the elaborate lights and DJ because it’s time to celebrate. At least I thought it was that simple. After a year of traveling to and fro the school and enduring through the 13-hour days away from home, summer arrived, and I returned to Newark full time. I had given up so much; now, I hoped to return to the friends that would welcome me back with open arms. At least I thought it was that simple. The very same people who encouraged me to find success, looked at me with disgust. “You’ve turned into one of them!” I was met with gawking curiosity, subtle condescension, and seldom open derision. They argued that by agreeing to attend my high school and accepting its lifestyle, I betrayed the city that nurtured me. Resentments rose and relationships deteriorated not only in Newark, but also thirty miles away in Morristown. Unbeknownst to those in Newark, I received similar condemnation in the form of questions like “Do rainbows existed where you come from?”

Inundated by the amount of seemingly pointless questions from friends from both cities, I thought my best course of action was to ignore them all. What is EDM? Why do you like rap? Have you ever seen a drug deal? How do you stay sane? Bombarded with questions about my personality, it seemed as if I had become “less Shawn Ohazuruike” than I was prior to attending high school. I belonged to neither city only to subsist in a lonely medium, “No Man’s Land”. But one day during my sophomore year, a student asked me “If I have ever seen a drug deal?” Puzzled and frustrated, I answered, “No, Newark is not as bad as you think.” Later that day, an idea dawned on me. What would happen if I answered all their questions? After entertaining their questions, I found a much more subtle, unnoticied issue.

Distance. The problem lies deep within the geographical thirty mile gap between cities. In an age where rumors and gossip can travel in the click of a button, we acknowledge baseless information as valid and create ludicrous ideas. The saddening factor lies in that all these assumptions are made without either party taking a single step in the cities they degrade. From the music, clothing, and slang, it is as if the two different cities were foreign countries, thousands of miles apart. However, now my subsistence in “No Man’s Land” was no longer desolate, it had a purpose, and it had to mimic the concept behind the “Chinese Finger Trap”. Whenever the two cities seem to be pulling apart, I have to act as the strong contraption that holds them together. However, when the tension between the cultures eases, like the “Finger trap”, I will ease my grip. Nonetheless, I cannot let go just yet. Because there exist only one cure to eradicate the culture ignorance. Truth. Moreover, as a member of both cultural spectrums, it is my duty to speak it. As a social and cultural justice advocate, the responsibility lies on me. Although there is immense pressure because I am from a city that most New Jersey residents fear, I work. I facilitate discussions, raise money, attend conferences, and lead cultural and diversity to work towards the goal of unity. Even if I only influence one person at a time, I will work until the people of whom I associate can step into Newark without fear or negativity. Even though it may seem as if I am the joint holding the two repelling cities together, I am content. Because when we acknowledge each other’s truths, we can all gain the prize I have long sought-after. Acceptance.