

## I. Arriving at Stanford

### **ARIANA LEE** Interview

**WELCOMED:** Tell us a little bit about your background, where you're from, your community, and what feels most important for readers to know.

**Ariana Lee:** Of course. Hello—my name is Ariana Lee. I'm a current freshman at Stanford University, and I'm from the East Coast. My family currently lives in Virginia, but we also have origins in New York and Georgia. My father is Black American, descending from a lineage of those enslaved. My mother comes from a family with an immigrant history. Her mother immigrated from Panama when she was very young, and she also has origins in Costa Rica and Jamaica. So I grew up with this balance: a foundational Black American culture from my father, and an Afro-Latina heritage from my mother.

**WELCOMED:** Did faith shape you growing up?

**Ariana Lee:** When I was younger, my maternal grandmother shaped our practice because my grandfather is a Pentecostal pastor. So I went every Sunday. I remember church as an important weekly event, seeing people, talking about ideas, right and wrong, and of course it was a formal occasion that required dressing up. I was thrilled whenever I got new dresses to go to church.

When my family moved to Georgia and were more distant from my maternal grandparents, our connection to church waned. We'd go on Easter and Christmas, but not every week. Georgia also offered a different kind of extra-institutional practice that made me feel more connected to my African American roots from my paternal side. I also experienced forms of spirituality outside formal church teaching: incense, astrological signs, and cultural superstitions. Later, when we moved back to Virginia and reconnected with my maternal grandparents, we returned to our weekly church ritual.

**WELCOMED:** Some philosophers like Kant, and later Richard Rorty, treat religion as private, something you keep separate from public reasoning. Rorty often suggested that universities "transform" students from conservative religious backgrounds into liberal secular citizens. How does your lived experience affirm, resist, or complicate that idea?

**Ariana Lee:** My experience complicates that story. I grew up with faith that was much more than private belief. It was community life. It shaped how people cared for each other, how they supported one another, and how they learned to lead.

And as I got older and started studying history and politics, I did become more critical of Christianity, especially how it entered Black communities through slavery and power. So I understand why some people see it as an imposition. But I don't think that's the whole story, because formerly enslaved people also built Black churches that became spaces for dignity, mutual aid, organizing, and culture. That's a public formation.

So when I hear the idea that Stanford's job is to take religious students and make them secular citizens, I resist the assumption underneath it: that we arrive as incomplete and need to be corrected. I'm not here to have my community rewritten. If anything, Stanford is giving me tools and language to understand the complexity I already live: to be honest about the history, to respect what Black communities built inside the church, and to keep thinking about what I believe now.

**WELCOMED:** Do you have a theology or a relationship to any revealed texts? Do you feel you believe in God?

**Ariana Lee:** A lot of people ask me this, and I don't really have a definite answer. Growing up in the church, I felt like I was supposed to take things at face value, especially because my grandfather was the pastor, so I had very little room to critique Christianity.

Later, as I became interested in history and politics, I started to dissect how the history of Christianity has impacted the Black community, and that created real qualms for me. At the same time, I'm still willing to explore. Theology is a really interesting academic field to me, especially how communities across the world have been shaped by Christianity. Right now, I tend to approach it more academically than as a personal faith, though I don't know, maybe that will shift.

**WELCOMED:** What is the most spiritual experience you've had with a text or work of art, something you've read, seen, or heard that stays with you, shapes you, or feels like it speaks to you?

**Ariana Lee:** During the 1970s, my paternal grandmother was a prominent Black activist member of the Black Power Movement. Growing up, she exposed me to the guiding texts and ideologies of the movement. Specifically, [\*Women, Race and Class\*](#) by Angela Davis, this book highlighted the intersectionality of the Black women's social experience. It spoke to me spiritually as described experiences that were unique to my own, offering a greater voice that validated my hopes and thought processes as a Black woman in America. This piece became instrumental in my development as a political activist, drawing me to want to major in political science.

**WELCOMED:** What did you bring with you to Stanford: values, identity, commitments, ways of seeing the world?

**Ariana Lee:** I think a lot of it comes from the community. In Virginia, Hampton Roads, specifically Newport News, I was in a predominantly Black and Hispanic community. I worked to address risk factors that came with that population and the gun violence that was prevalent in the area. I worked with an organization called Community Builders Network, which created space for the community to speak with legislative representatives, so people could actually be heard.

I was also involved in Key Club International, and I worked with communities across different states to get students involved in service and responding to the needs of their own communities. So I brought that orientation with me to campus: paying attention to what a community needs, and trying to build pathways for people's voices to matter.

I intend to go into politics and am currently majoring in political science, and I think it's important that I bring the Black experience holistically into the political arenas I enter in the future. Having conversations and gaining experiences here is something I'll cherish and carry forward, and I want to amplify the Black experience in those spheres.

**WELCOMED:** You live in the Black Diaspora dorm, Ujamaa. How does Ujamaa build love of community, care, belonging?

**Ariana Lee:** I come from a lineage of HBCU graduates, so choosing a predominantly white institution (PWI) felt like a real shift. When it came time to pick housing, Ujamaa was my first choice because I wanted a community that would support me both academically and socially, and it has done exactly that.

Ujamaa has been a steady source of care, especially during stressful weeks. When anxiety hits, whether it's a problem set or essay, my RAs and the people around me step in with real support. They check on you, they help you regroup, and they make it clear you're not shouldering everything alone. I've always felt like someone is in my corner.

I also value Ujamaa because, with a smaller Black student population at Stanford, it creates a space where our experiences are understood. People listen to what we're navigating socially and academically, to the pressures that come with being Black on this campus, and to the things we sometimes need to say out loud in order to breathe.

Ujamaa differs from home, because there I wasn't constantly aware of being in the minority. Here, I am. In Ujamaa, I can speak freely about the parts of my life that shape me, my hair, my

background, experiences with discrimination, and how I move through Stanford without having to explain the basics or translate my reality for people who might not get it.

That's why Ujamaa is much more than a social space or a place to sleep. It's an academic community first. There's real knowledge-sharing, honest conversations, and debate about ideas, exactly what an ethnic themed dorm can make possible when it's working well. I love visiting other communities like the Indigenous People's dorm. I'm there as an outsider learning how they see their community and values. Uj also collaborates with other dorms. Being here has also deepened my understanding of how diverse the Black community at Stanford is. We come from different financial backgrounds, ethnic histories, states, and even countries. That exchange, combined with the sense of love and care that surrounds Ujamaa, is what I appreciate most.

**WELCOMED:** Last question: what would you recommend to a newcomer to Stanford from your community?

**Ariana Lee:** I would say: find a real community early. The people you choose may shift a bit as you get to know them, because you're looking for people who support you academically and socially, where you can speak honestly about your experiences and still feel understood. For me, choosing Ujamaa was choosing that kind of community, one that helps you stay grounded in who you are, while also helping you grow into what you want to carry forward.