CONVOLUTED CODE-SWITCH

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Preface

Code-switching involves adjusting one’s style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, and access to opportunities (McCluney, Robotham, Lee, et al., 2019). Many characterize it as an inauthentic attempt to adapt to unfamiliar surroundings. However, why and how code-switching is deployed by marginalized folks in settings that lack BIPOC representation differs vastly from their white counterparts. More often than not, marginalized folks use it as a means of survival and respite, not convenience. This poem aims to take a strengths-based approach to an otherwise exhausting act for underrepresented populations while also challenging the white-centered social work sector to address oppression-driven emotional fatigue amongst BIPOC social workers.

Let me make this very clear,
I am not apologizing for my organic complexity or seeking your validation of my countless years of 21 questions.

Because I know this identity interrogation is infinite.
As is your curiosity.

But what I am doing is giving you a gift.
See, most days I just shoulder this burden and summon the strong backs of those gracious ebony ghosts that fill me with such resilience. More than 400 years’ worth.

Believe me I can take it.
But the pieces to your life puzzle seem to lay still and dormant while you peek over at mine.

My puzzle is bright orange with the sun’s rays infused in every piece.
Deep charcoal corners that fold over on themselves like a scroll, and when the light hits them just right, you can see little grains of brown sugar melting into the center.

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They dance and dart about the floor,
latching on to each other and then pushing away.
A captivating Lindy Hop to a silent tune that only I can hear.
A hushed chaos.

But you notice the puzzle pieces never stay the same shape.
Each time they make contact a warm embrace is the result,
a calculated union that was prearranged in the milliseconds
it took for them to meet.

Then as soon as they are intertwined in harmony
they are again forced apart, indecisive, unfulfilled,
colliding with another piece moments later.

This is my code-switch.

See, in this world I unfortunately don’t have the luxury of being
authentically me
in spaces that match your connotation of intellect.

I was taught these chameleon games the moment my eyes saw daylight,
the moment I became the only Black face in the room,
the moment I heard, “I mean…but you’re not like them.”

Who is “them” and who is you?
See I am the “them” you speak of.
I have just given you my gift and you didn’t even notice.
My gift is a simplified version of myself
to keep your robotic mind from short circuiting

Your bias error alerts crash the whole room and let’s be honest,
My cultural bandwidth is enough to overload your closed-minded
connection,
and we’d all be left buffering for hours waiting for you to process my
existence.

See, my gift allows progress and facilitates urgency.
My puzzle pieces whizz around the room so fast connecting to everything
in sight
that you didn’t even notice I connected to you.
That’s why you see me.
See, when I am with my people and those that understand, 
our pieces lay together. Holding one another in silence, 
this time they don't let go or push away.  
They turn a warm Earth tone and exhale peace.  
Still glowing bright. Smelling brown sugar sweet.  

Stand back to the heavens and you will see a beautiful tapestry.  
No end and no beginning. Splendor for eons.  

That tune that you couldn’t hear before, hums loud and proud.  
Divine notes only Momma knows how to hit.  

But when you’re around my pieces feel uneasy.  
They run around screaming, they feel anxiety and isolation,  
They cry out “I demand that you see me, I am here, I do exist!”  
But again, their sound goes away.  

They latch on to anything in sight to feel a touch.  
But the other pieces they collide with don’t match.  
They latch to themselves for comfort, but that isn’t enough.  
They push away, the brown sugar sweet is overtaken by a bitter salt.  

But with momentous pride and class they make it look like  
that rhythmic Lindy Hop.  
“Don’t let it show,” they whisper.  
Wiping the tears and putting on a smile.  

I don’t mean to paint a grim scene.  
I’m just trying to shed light on that cloud of confusion that comes from  
trying to comprehend my code-switching convolution.  

So, you see, when you’re staring at my puzzle pieces  
commenting on how they dart around.  
Making remarks about how they “seem okay” but would be much better  
if they just “open up” or just “act right”.  

They actually have…and do.  
They have the power to mold and fit any puzzle piece they come into  
contact with.  
You can thank those gracious ebony ghosts for that.  

But it is only with the chosen few that the connection remains.
The embrace is true and filled with common love.

You are not a piece of the beautiful tapestry that has already been painted. And I feel sorry for you.

So, each day I politely awaken the tapestry pieces, valiantly wipe the sweet brown sugar from my soul, and put my inner peace into disarray while I walk amongst you in order to change this world.

Because at the end of the day you need me. You need Us.

REFERENCE


DEREK NETTINGHAM is a second-year student at the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice with a Social Administration and Global Social Development Practice focus. With over 8 years of professional experience doing DEI work within higher education, Derek believes that rooting his approach to social work in a global framework allows room for boundless growth and infinite ways to support marginalized folks worldwide. He hopes to return to higher education in a leadership role focused on DEI advocacy and making college campuses welcoming spaces for all students no matter their race, religion, sexual orientation, citizenship status, or any other attribute that encompasses one’s identity.