Switch | Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice

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.

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.

References

McCluney, C. L., Robotham, K., Lee, S., Smith, R. & Durkee, M. (2019). The costs of code-switching. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2019/11/ the-costs-of-codeswitching

Author Biography

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.