

**Polyglossia: The Survival Languages of Black Women**

Perpetual Hayfron

University of Massachusetts Boston

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According to Russian philosopher Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, “polyglossia was appropriated and canonized among all the genres.” In 1981, when Bakhtin wrote this, he was writing in regards to the three different characteristics of the novel. The novel has always been present in the world of literature but did not have the status or roots of the Epic. The languages or polyglossia of the novel “had not been a factor in literary creation” (pg.12). Similar to Black women not being a factor in education research. Historically and presently, Black women are appropriated and canonized in various aspects of their lives. They also play different roles throughout their life span in order to survive. In order to succeed in surviving, there is a role they must play at all times. That is the role of a Polyglot. Polyglot is the term used to describe a person who speaks four or more languages. Language is the primary tool utilized for humans to communicate. However, more often than not, Black women are not considered human. In order to preserve their internal humanity and for society at large to consider a fraction of their humanity, Black women must utilize different languages to communicate based on what and who they encounter. For centuries there have been attempts to eradicate the humanity of Black women, simply due the very factors that make them who they are. The factors that make them magical, simply because they exist! An example of this is the Tignon Law established in 1786. The Tignon Law was enacted so that Black Women, with special attention to those women who were of lighter skin tone, would keep their hair covered under a tignon (a headcover) so they would not be more desirable to the dominant class of White men than their White female counterparts. Fast forward to 2019 and the hair of Black women still poses a threat. Hence why

their hair is patted down and inspected at airports guarded by government officials and one of the reasons why they manipulate their hair when seeking to obtain employment. Yet, White women such as Kim Kardashian appropriate the same hairstyles that Black women have historically been demonized for and are praised for their ingenuity. This is the Survival Language of Aesthetics, for Acceptance. For the purpose of this assignment, Survival Language is the term that will be utilized to categorize the multiple languages in which Black women verbally and nonverbally communicate with the world in order to live. In addition to Aesthetics there are eight other Survival Languages Black women exercise in their attempts for survival. The Survival Languages include but are not limited to: Silence for Survival, Code Switching to combat Passive Aggressiveness, Cooking for Comfort, Creativity and Community, Aesthetics for Acceptance, Rationalization for Sanity, Tolerance for Stability, Prayer for Peace, Education for Equity and Self-love for Healing.

### **Silence for Survival**

In the wake of the MeToo movement, founded by a Black woman, Tarana Burke, multiple men and women of all racial backgrounds, who were survivors of sexual assault in the entertainment industry came forward and publicly named their attackers. One of the prominent attackers reported was award winning producer Harvey Weinstein. One of the women assaulted by Weinstein was Kenyan-Mexican actress Lupita Nyong'o. On October 17, 2017, she wrote a piece for the New York Times regarding her assault by Weinstein. The article begins with Nyong'o stating that she purposely kept silent about the assault because she felt isolated and

blamed herself for the events that had taken place. Stating that when the allegations against Weinstein went public, the memories of her attack were no longer quiet and made her physically ill. Nyong'o recalled that she first met her attacker while she was a student at Yale School of Drama. She was introduced to Weinstein as "the most powerful producer in Hollywood." At the end of their initial encounter the two individuals had exchanged contact information. The year was 2011 and they had met at an awards ceremony in Berlin. As the article continues Nyong'o recalls that Weinstein contacted her shortly after their introduction and invited her a screening in Westport, Connecticut home which was a short distance from where she was living at the time in New Haven. A driver was sent to transport the actress and Weinstein informed her they would be going lunch before the screening. Nyong'o goes on to vividly depict this encounter, which also includes the silence she spoke to survive. Little did she know her encounter with this individual would cause her to be silent about a series of encounters over a period of six years. During their lunch Weinstein ordered an alcoholic beverage and to Weinstein's dismay, Nyong'o ordered juice. After a failed debated with Nyong'o about her beverage choice, Weinstein turned to the waiter and stated, "Get her what I tell you to get her, I'm paying the bill." During this moment Nyong'o wrote, "I smiled and remained silent." The waiter later returned with a vodka and diet soda for the actress, which Weinstein placed by her water. No juice ever arrived. Nyong'o drank the water, refused to drink the alcohol and was questioned by Weinstein regarding her refusal of the beverage. In response to his question, the actress cleverly responded to producer "Because I don't like vodka, and I don't like diet soda, and I don't like them together." He insisted she drink the beverage and when she verbally refused with a smile, the producer called her stubborn. Upon her arrival to the home of the producer, he gave her a short tour of his home and introduced the

actress to his children. After the introductions Nyong'o, Weinstein and his children went to the in-home screening room to view the film that was the cause for the actress and producer to have their second encounter. Fifteen minutes into the film, Weinstein went to retrieve Nyong'o from the screening and requested she go with him to "see something." When the actress resisted, informing him that she wanted to finish the film, the producer insisted. Nyong'o wrote that his insistence made her feel as if the producer was giving a directive to his own children, that she had just met. Weinstein brought the actress to his bedroom and told her that he wanted to give her a massage. When Nyong'o realized Weinstein was not joking, she began to feel unsafe and in order gain some semblance of control of the situation, she offered the producer a massage instead. During the massage, Weinstein expressed to Nyong'o that he wanted to take his pants off. The actress informed the producer, that she did not feel comfortable and would go back to school if they were not going to continue watching the film. From that point on nothing further took place and the actress was able to escape from the home. Until 2013, Nyong'o experienced a series of harassment from Weinstein, which she did not ever speak of until 2017. During those years, in addition to the sexual harassment, Nyong'o received multiple acting opportunities from Weinstein and to the suspicion of others, turned them down. In addition to threatening the physical and emotional well-being of the actress, Weinstein also had the power to discredit her entire career before it even started. Which is why during one of the encounters with the producer, after narrowly escaping assault, she asked him if the two "were good." Which Weinstein responded to saying "I don't know about your career, but you'll be fine." One could say that Nyong'o was is fine. She wasn't raped, despite these incidents, has a successful career and is a Yale graduate. But at what cost? Though she was just as successful as the other actress

that came forward, when she made her voice heard, her version of events was met with opposition from Weinstein. Along with accounts of Nyong'o, multiple high-profile actresses, over fifty, brought forth allegations of sexual harassment and rape from Weinstein. The only allegations the producer publicly responded to were from women of color. Nyong'o and Mexican, American actress, Selma Hayek. In 2018 Hayek stated while on a panel that women of color were "the easiest to discredit," "It is a well-known fact. So he went back, attacking the two women of color, in hopes that if he could discredit us." Another example of Black women speaking Silence for Survival are the numerous victims of R&B superstar Robert Kelly, popularly known as R. Kelly. In January 2019, a documentary series entitled, Surviving R. Kelly, was released. The documentary consisted of six parts, that contained disturbing interviews with Black women and their families who had had been held captive, sexually assaulted and physically, mentally, and emotionally abused by the famous entertainer. In 2008, Kelly faced eighteen charges of child pornography, for recording where Kelly appeared to be having sexual intercourse with a minor. Though there was video evidence, the entertainer was acquitted of all charges brought against him. One of the potential reasons being that the victim in question, who was suspected of being between 12 to 14 years old in the video, did not testify against Kelly during the trial.

### **Code Switching to combat Passive Aggressiveness**

In her 2019 HBO comedy special, I Be Knowin', actress and comedian Amanda Seales candidly showcase what it is like being a Black woman in America today, with special attention

to the experiences of Black women in the workplace. When speaking about the interactions of Black women with their White counterparts in the work place, Seales shares her perspective on the condescending, passive aggressive behavior of White people, by stating to the crowd that included White audience members, “Y’all done turned passive aggression into a synonym for professionalism!” Seales then proceeds to shed light on the ways that Black Women must change their language in the workplace so they do not seem intimidating, due to White fragility, even when they have been treated unfairly professionally. Code Switching is the act of alternating between two styles of speech or language, usually within the same conversation. However, for Black people, code switching is utilized situationally and is rooted in respectability politics. Respectability politics is the term that refers to underrepresented racial and class groups requiring themselves to behave in a certain way in order to gain the recognition of a dominant race or class. When Black women do not utilize code switching and do not conform to respectability politics they are often demonized and made to appear as if they possess uncontrollable and insatiable anger. On May 31, 2017, author and Princeton professor, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor released a statement through her publisher Haymarket Books, via Facebook, stating that she was cancelling two of her speaking engagements, out of fear for herself and the safety of her family. These speaking engagements were scheduled to take place after Taylor had delivered her commencement address at Hampshire College. During her speech Taylor stated that “The president of the United States, the most powerful politician in the world, is a racist, sexist megalomaniac.” Though she received nothing but praise for her delivery during the commencement ceremony, Fox News reported that Taylor went on an “anti POTUS tirade.”

(Fox News, 2017) After the news report went viral, Taylor received death threats and was inundated with hate speech. In her statement through her publisher Taylor stated:

“I have been repeatedly called “nigger,” “bitch,” “cunt,” “dyke,” “she-male,” and “coon” — a clear reminder that racial violence is closely aligned with gender and sexual violence. I have been threatened with lynching and having the bullet from a .44 Magnum put in my head. I am not a newsworthy person. Fox did not run this story because it was “news,” but to incite and unleash the mob-like mentality of its fringe audience, anticipating that they would respond with a deluge of hate-filled emails — or worse. The threat of violence, whether it is implied or acted on, is intended to intimidate and to silence.” (Haymarket Books, 2017)

### **Cooking for Comfort, Creativity and Community**

During the enslavement of African people, their owners only provided them with the food they did not want. Obtaining work after the abolishment of slavery was very difficult for enslaved families and many stayed working on the plantations in which they were enslaved, as alternative options were close to nonexistent. Meat was difficult to afford and vegetables were the most accessible. During those times Black women did the cooking for their owner’s and for their families. Due to food being sparingly rationed, the creation of Soul Food was birthed with minimal resources. Popular dishes include but are not limited to:

- Biscuits (a shortbread similar to scones, commonly served with butter, jam, jelly, sorghum or cane syrup, or gravy; used to wipe up, or "sop," liquids from a dish).
- Black-eyed peas (cooked separately or with rice, as hoppin' john).

- Butter beans (immature lima beans, usually cooked in butter).
- Catfish (dredged in seasoned cornbread and fried). Chicken (often fried with cornmeal breading or seasoned flour).
- Chicken livers.
- Chitterlings or chitlins: (the cleaned and prepared intestines of hogs, slow-cooked and often eaten with vinegar and hot sauce; sometimes parboiled, then battered and fried).
- Chow-chow (a spicy, homemade pickle relish sometimes made with okra, corn, cabbage, green tomatoes and other vegetables; commonly used to top black-eyed peas and otherwise as a condiment and side dish).
- Collard greens (usually cooked with ham hocks, often combined with other greens).
- Cornbread (short bread often baked in an iron skillet, sometimes seasoned with bacon fat). Chicken fried steak (beef deep fried in flour or batter, usually served with gravy).
- Cracklins: (commonly known as pork rinds and sometimes added to cornbread batter).
- Fatback (fatty, cured, salted pork used to season meats and vegetables).
- Fried fish: (any of several varieties of fish whiting, catfish, porgies, bluegills dredged in seasoned cornmeal and deep fried).
- Fried ice cream: (Ice cream deep frozen and coated with cookies and fried).
- Grits, often served with fish.
- Ham hocks (smoked, used to flavor vegetables and legumes).
- Hog maws (or hog jowls, sliced and usually cooked with chitterlings).
- Hoghead cheese.

- Hot sauce (a condiment of cayenne peppers, vinegar, salt, garlic and other spices often used on chitterlings, fried chicken and fish not the same as "Tabasco sauce", which has heat, but little flavor).
  - Lima beans (see butter beans).
  - Macaroni and cheese.
  - Mashed potatoes (usually with butter and condensed milk). Meatloaf (typically with brown gravy).
  - Milk and bread (a "po' folks' dessert-in-a-glass" of slightly crumbled cornbread, buttermilk and sugar). Mustard greens (usually cooked with ham hocks, often combined with other greens).
  - Neckbones (beef neck bones seasoned and slow cooked). Okra: (African vegetable eaten fried in cornmeal or stewed, often with tomatoes, corn, onions and hot peppers).
  - Pigs' feet: (slow-cooked like chitterlings, sometimes pickled and, like chitterlings, often eaten with vinegar and hot sauce).
  - Red beans.
  - Ribs (usually pork, but can also be beef ribs).
  - Rice (usually served with red beans).
  - Sorghum syrup (from sorghum, or "Guinea corn," a sweet grain indigenous to Africa introduced into the U.S. by African slaves in the early 17th century; see biscuits).
- Succotash (originally, a Native American dish of yellow corn and butter beans, usually cooked in butter).

- Sweet potatoes (often parboiled, sliced and then baked, using sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg and butter or margarine, commonly called "candied yams"; also boiled, then pureed and baked into pies).
- Turnip greens (usually cooked with ham hocks, often combined with other greens).
- Yams: (not actually yams, but sweet potatoes). (African American Registry, 1492)

Currently, the majority of food deserts are located in low-income neighborhoods that contain high populations of people of color. Food deserts are specific areas that have limited access to nutrient rich foods. For example, the majority of lower income neighborhoods in the United States contains a multitude of liquor and corner stores with no grocery stores within walking distance. Most inhabitants of lower income neighborhoods do not possess or struggle to maintain personal vehicles. Despite limited resources, Black women have been creating culinary masterpieces from scraps for centuries. However, Black women rarely get credit for their culinary achievements. Elle Simone Scott is the first Black woman to have been a cast member on America's Test Kitchen. The PBS television show debuted in 2001, and is currently in its 19<sup>th</sup> season. In December 2018, Scott was featured in an article in the Boston Globe that highlighted her culinary journey and deemed her "a mentor and role model for black women." (Boston Globe, 2018) In the article the chef recalls her experiences after graduating from culinary school in 2010, stating that when she began working in the culinary field, she did not encounter her classmates that were female or of color. Scott stated "I think creating positive kitchen cultures is the solution. I don't want to spend a whole bunch of time talking about these problems that aren't my problems. It's not my job to undo racism. I didn't create it. It's my job to create a positive, affirmed culture of women who can navigate." When there were organizations for women of

color in the culinary world to subscribe to, Scott created SheChef. SheChef was formed in order for women of color in the culinary industry to have a support system and network.

### **Aesthetics for Acceptance**

During and post slavery, the role of the Mammy was developed. In her book *Sister Citizen*, Melissa Harris Perry stated the "Mammy was not a protector or defender of Black children or communities. She represented a maternal ideal, but not in caring for her own children. Her love, doting, advice, correction, and supervision were reserved exclusively for white women and children." (2011, p.72). In art, television, and literature the Mammy is illustrated as a middle-aged, heavysset with large breasts and a dark complexion (the complete opposite of the physical appearance of the fairer skinned slaves who were taken as mistresses and raped by their owners). Named, after Black women who were slaves and servant's in White households. These women in addition to maintaining the households in which they were enslaved or working in, also reared the children born into those households. Their duties included but were not limited to: cooking, cleaning, breastfeeding the children of their owners/employers, teaching the children etiquette and fulfilling any other duties as requested by their owners/employer's wives. Unlike other Black women who were enslaved or worked in White households, it was common practice for the mammy to stay with one family even after the children had left the home. When there were no more children to care for in the household where she worked, the mammy would assist the wife of her master/employer with daily household duties that needed to be taken care of. These women were considered asexual and if they

happened to have families of their own, their families were often neglected due to their priorities being those of the family they worked for. During those times, Black women were also labeled as Jezebel's. A Jezebel was a term used during slavery to describe Black women who were slaves that were raped by their owners and other White men who held positions of power as overseers, on plantations. Due to these women being the property of slave owners, the sexual assault they endured was not perceived as rape and their rapists faced no legal consequences. In addition to this, according to overseers on the slave plantations, these women were considered to have insatiable sexual appetites and could not be sexually satisfied by Black men which gave the slavers justification to rape them. The Jezebel stereotype represents African American women as promiscuous man-eaters whose sexual appetites are "at best inappropriate and, at worst, insatiable" (Hill Collins. 2000: 83 et.al Versluys, p. 11). Though the Tignon Law is no longer enacted, throughout history, the appearance of Black women has been ridiculed, shamefully exaggerated and physically exploited. This has led to gross societal misconceptions of this particular group and impact the ways in which Black women are portrayed in media, perceived in society and negated in education.

### **Rationalization for Sanity**

The effects of generational trauma, specifically for Black women are a result of race. This trauma has evolved out of historical, oppressive and race related circumstances ranging from slavery to desegregation. The evolution of trauma for this historically oppressed group can be difficult to recognize due to their ability to be successful in various roles, despite their

environmental, historical or social stressors. This ability is the primary reason why Black women struggle to procure and engage in mental health services due to unconsciously rationalizing their trauma in order to survive, in addition to the negative stigmas affiliated with mental health services. The consequence of this rationalization is the mental and physical health of Black Women. This struggle is perpetuated further, by the majority of mental health practitioners in the field, not reflecting characteristics such as race and lived experiences that are relatable to Black women. This rationalization can also be viewed as “normalized chaos” a term coined by Shawn Arango Ricks in 2018. “When Black Women start viewing their hectic, overscheduled and potentially traumatic lives as “normal”, they continue to engage in self-defeating and unhealthy behaviors and are less likely to recognize potential mental and physical health distress” (Ricks, 2018, pg. 343). The majority of Black women are the matriarchs of their families, hold leadership positions in their careers, are prominent pillars in their community and are often seen playing the role of the “Strong Black Woman” in media (Is The 'Strong Black Woman' Stereotype Hurting Black Women? 2018). It has become so common for Black women to excel in “less than” conditions, it’s become their unconscious reality to remain resilient, despite the environments they are in and the treatment they receive (Evans-Winters, Giscombe). This unconscious reality is perpetuated by the media’s portrayal of Black women (Harris-Perry), which has greatly impacted how Black women are perceived in society.

### **Tolerance for Stability**

In her book *Eloquent Rage*, Brittany Cooper, entitled the first chapter of the book “The Problem with Sass.” Cooper stated “Black women turn to sass when rage is too risky- because we have jobs to keep, families to feed and bills to pay.” (pg. 2) As previously mentioned, comedian Amanda Seales highlighted the ways in which Black women must change their language in order to minimize discomfort for the dominant race. In addition to codeswitching, Black women must sensor themselves in order to maintain their stability or deal with consequences that affect families and reputations. In 2016, political analyst, professor and author Melissa Harris Perry was fired from the MSNBC television network, for sending an email that “accused” the network for silencing her, after returning to the network and discovering the network preemptively prepared for news regarding 2016 the elections to be aired in place of her show, where she discussed, race and social inequity, without her knowledge, input, or permission. Perry refused to host the election coverage in place of her show. Instead she sent an email, part of which sated:

“Here is the reality: Our show was taken — without comment or discussion or notice — in the midst of an election season, after four years of building an audience, developing a brand and developing trust with our viewers, we were effectively and utterly silenced.” (New York Times, 2016)

Perry’s termination took place after the email was sent. Prior to all this Perry made multiple attempts to contact the executives at NBC in regards to the status of her show and received no acknowledgement or definitive response. At the time Perry was the primary provider of her family, including her mother. In the media Perry’s email was labeled as critical, sharp, harsh and

many other names, for telling her truth. The truth of Black women is often demonized when it makes others uncomfortable. Knowing this, most Black women are very careful, or just silent when they are mistreated, neglected or tokens, because of their dependents and their own need for stability.

### **Prayer for Peace**

In the Black community access to quality and affordable mental health resources are slim and mental health is attached to stigma birthed out of systematic oppression. Furthermore, Black women are often the matriarchs of their families, with little assistance, or time for themselves, they often lean on their faith in times of adversity more than anything else.

In 2012, The Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation, conducted a poll amongst 1,936 individuals from various racial backgrounds that included 800 Black women. According to the Washington Post, the survey was “the most extensive exploration of Black women’s lives in decades”. (Washington Post, 2012) After the poll was completed, the Washington Post published an article entitled “Black women are among country’s most religious groups”. Data from the survey revealed that 76 percent of Black women believed living a religious life was important. When asked, “How important a role does religion or faith in God play in helping you get through tough times - very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important?” 87 percent of the 800 women surveyed stated that their faith was very important during difficult times in their lives. Associate Professor of Ethics and Society, Stacey Flyod-Thomas was quoted in the article stating

“Black women have been the most mistreated and scandalized in U.S. society and culture as they wrestle both individually and collectively with the triple jeopardy of racism, sexism and classism. If that is the case — and I believe it is — it is no wonder that black women, due to their experience of sexism, would seek out their faith as a way of finding relief, reprieve, resolution and redemption.” (Washington Post, 2012)

### **Education for Equity**

During slavery Black people were not allowed to read or engage in any schooling. Slaves who were caught attempting to be literate were severely punished or killed. After slavery was abolished Black people were not allowed to go to school with White people and were deprived of the same educational resources as white students. These injustices are still relevant in education today. In 2002, an interview by David Scott, conducted with Slyvia Wynter was published entitled “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Slyvia Wynter”. In the preface of the interview Scott highlights “the connection between humanism and dehumanization” and relates it to a “footnote” while providing the reader historical context for the term humanism (Scott, 2002). Scott, conscientiously chooses to set aside the historical context of the word, in order to address the similarities of humanism and colonialism. Eighteen years prior, in 1984, Linda Grant conducted a qualitative study and published an article entitled “Black Females “Place” in Desegregated Classrooms”. Despite their skin color, ethnicity, nationality, immigration and socioeconomic statuses, the resiliency of Black women has been involuntarily developed from infancy in order for survival (Grant, 1987). Grant states “public schools are

critical agencies in the transmission of status arrangements from one generation to the next” (Grant, p.98). Thirty-five years has passed since Grant completed her study. The Black girls from that study, are now Black women and there is a new generation of Black girls who continue to be a footnote in education. Schools are site of oppression for Black girls, their humanity is overshadowed by their resiliency. School systems were not created or intended for Black children (Rollock, 2007, p.103).

### **Self-love for Healing**

In her book *Eloquent Rage*, Brittany Copper states “Loving Black girls is complicated, but loving oneself in a world where there is always someone ready to do you harm is even harder.” Cooper’s words are devastating, yet true. Historically and presently Black women are known to be strong, resilient, courageous and hardworking. However, according to Malcolm X, during a speech he gave in 1962, “the most disrespected woman in America, is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America, is the Black woman”. (“Who Taught You to Hate Yourself”, 2016) In a time where racism and sexism are no longer cavalierly swept under the rug, Black women have an opportunity to openly love themselves in order to heal from historical, generational and racial trauma that has become an involuntary birth right. This is in no way without Black women having to endure more pain during the process of healing and unlearning. However, if there is one particular group that is capable of accomplishing such as task it is the Black woman.

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