BEAUTY

Lupita Nyong'o and Friends Come Together for a Braiding Party in New York

by Mackenzie Wagoner

Watch Nyong'o demonstrate her braiding skills in the video above.

On a recent Monday afternoon in June, Lupita Nyong'o is hovering above six of her closest friends, who are swiveling atop the black leather barber style chairs inside New York City's
sunlit Ludlow Blunt salon. They have come from all over the Eastern seaboard for the day to have Nyong'o braid their hair. “Lu’s ‘Do’s,’” they call out, referencing the Oscar-winning actress’s hidden talent for professional-level plaing, before breaking into peels of laughter. “Four and a half stars on Yelp!”

As Nyong'o sets to twisting Bantu knots, sculpting dookie braids, and meticulously sectioning hair into cornrows, her friends close their eyes and lean to her will. It’s a ritual they’ve been taking part of together for over a decade, since the Kenya-bred actress made a vow to master the skill while attending Amherst’s Hampshire College after finding herself “morbidly disappointed” with braiding salons stateside. She vowed to learn how to style her own and held hopes of turning it into a money-making “side hustle” at drama school. It turned out to be neither; holding her arms above her own head for such a long time felt like “an act of madness,” she laughingly admits, and she didn’t have the heart to charge her friends.

What braiding did become was an unlikely asset for acting training—she credits the skill with keeping her awake during hours long classes at Hampshire and, later the Yale School of Drama, and for forging lasting, intimate relationships with the “genuine,” “honest,” “creative” friends who continue to “challenge me and require me to grow as a human being.”

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The women in question are Jennifer Odera, a graduate student and childhood friend who, like Nyong’o, started having her hair braided when she was “itsy bitsy” in Kenya (where there were hairdressers “on every street corner”) in order to adhere to their primary school uniform dress code; Tashal Brown, an educator and Nyong’o’s roommate from Hampshire College; Yale classmates Miriam Hyman and Hallie Cooper-Novack, as well as Stacey Sargeant, an actress whom she met while at the university; and Nontsikelelo Mutiti, a professor and artist who is currently hosting an art show revolving around the culture of braiding at New York City’s Recess gallery.

Upon seeing each other reunited for the occasion, their voices jump an octave and Nyong’o exclaims in excitement, “I’m going to cry!” They hug, they sing, they dance across the salon’s white tiled floor, but now that the braiding has commenced, they move into more meditative catch-ups, occasionally breaking for laughter when topics turn to Da Brat and Kris Kross—“I definitely wore my jeans backwards,” admits Nyong’o. When she finishes a friend’s twists, she brushes off her shoulders in jest.

Joking aside, it’s a painstaking process that Nyong’o takes seriously. “Your hair is your frame—it’s so important,” she says. And, she emphasizes, “braiding tells a story,” marking the body with a symbol of communal affection. As Mutiti says simply, “braiding connects.”

These days, as the growing responsibilities of life, family, and career take hold, the ritual remains precious between friends. “I’m really hoping the acting thing does work out,” says Nyong’o with a smile. “Then this can remain a hobby for those lucky few.”

Read Lupita Nyong’o’s July cover story.

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Watch Lupita Nyong’o show off her braiding skills.