

L is for...

LUPITA NYONG'O, the most wanted woman in the industry right now. But being the subject of that level of desire, she says, is superficial – her heart lies in much more private affairs. *Carolyn Kormann* gets personal with the trailblazing Kenyan actress, as they discuss driving change in Hollywood, empowering women, redressing beauty standards for people of color, and why no one should dare touch her hair...

*Photography by Mario Sorrenti
Fashion editor Cathy Kasterine*

Dress, \$4,457,
choker, \$2,923, and
belt, \$1,151, all by
Versace; bracelet
by Robert Lee
Morris, from \$155;
cuff by Kenneth
Jay Lane, \$145



One warm spring morning, I find Lupita Nyong'o, the 35-year-old, Oscar-winning actress and international star sitting in a nest of gem-colored pillows at the corner table of an empty restaurant in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. Sunlight streams through the wall of windows next to her. Calm and luminous, she greets me quietly – obviously not one for small talk. After ordering a hibiscus tea, she turns to me and asks, “What’s the ring about?” nodding at it hanging from a chain around my neck. She’s doing my job – immediately homing in on the precise thing that can quickly take a shallow conversation between strangers to a more intimate place. But this is Nyong'o’s way, acutely observant and irrepressibly curious. Later she tells me, “That’s my job too—to take other people’s circumstances very personally.”

This might seem like an unlikely perspective for a leading lady in Hollywood, but it’s been one of her guiding principles over the last decade or so since she set out from Kenya – where she grew up – to be an actress in the United States. “It’s empowering more than anything else,” says Nyong'o, “to meditate on others’ experiences.” This, she adds, is the reason she became an actress. “At times, I’ve had to remind myself why I love [acting]. It’s not because of the recognition. I love it because I enjoy experiencing the world through other people’s eyes.”

As women are reclaiming their power through the #MeToo and Time’s Up anti-harassment movements, Nyong'o comes across as a woman who has never relinquished control of hers.

Since winning Best Supporting Actress at the Academy Awards in 2014 for her breakout and transfixing performance in *12 Years a Slave* – her first feature film – she has navigated Tinseltown staying true to her principles, focusing on the work, while steadily advancing her career and maintaining her position at the top – a matter she does not take lightly. More recently, she starred in *Black Panther*, the Marvel Studios Disney franchise that was both a critical and financial success, not to mention the catalyst for a global wave of cultural pride and solidarity among people of color everywhere. Then, in May, she announced two new major films: *355*, a female-led spy-thriller, created by Jessica Chastain, which she helped sell at Cannes Film Festival for more than \$20 million; and *Us*, Jordan Peele’s follow-up to hit, *Get Out*. She is also a producer on a TV miniseries adaptation of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s bestselling novel *Americanah*, in which she’ll also star.

She commands authority beyond the industry too, with two major beauty contracts – Lancôme, and as of July, Calvin Klein. She has appeared on the cover of *American Vogue* four times, and earlier this year the *Hollywood Reporter* named her the most famous African actress in the world. She recognizes the responsibility that such power wields, and manages it with integrity and purpose. “She always brought a wonderful personal perspective – and political commitment – to her work,” says Evan Yionoulis, one of her acting professors at the Yale School of Drama, where she studied in the anonymous years immediately preceding *12 Years a Slave*. “That’s now writ large in the way she is handling her life and her fame.” >



Dress by Givenchy, \$16,459



Dress by
Gucci, \$7,595,
at Net-A-
Porter.com;
necklace by
Fallon, \$225



Dress by Richard
Quinn, POA; hair
tie, stylist's own



“Being featured on the cover of a magazine *fulfills* me, as it is an opportunity to show other dark, kinky-haired people, and particularly our children, that they are *beautiful* just the way they are”



Dress by Saint
Laurent by
Anthony
Vaccarello,
\$4,390





Coat, \$4,614,
top, \$1,217,
and pants,
\$1,471, all by
Valentino

Last October, Nyong'o published a widely shared op-ed for the *New York Times*, revealing that, like many of her peers in Hollywood, she had been sexually harassed by Harvey Weinstein. In crisp, clear, straightforward prose, she explained that he had twice bluntly propositioned her. On the second occasion, after meeting him at a restaurant in Tribeca, he told her, "Let's cut to the chase. I have a private room upstairs where we can have the rest of our meal." She refused. He told her "not to be so naïve," that if she wanted to be an actress, she "had to be willing to do that sort of thing". She held fast and again declined. "With all due respect," she told him, "I would not be able to sleep at night if I did what you are asking, so I must pass." She said at the time that once women began coming forward about what he had done to them, the essay became something she had to write. She felt sick until she did.

She shared a rough draft of her story with her mother, to whom she credits much of her success and who fully supported her op-ed. "I don't underestimate how much she influenced who I am," Nyong'o says, playing with the tiny gold elephant that hangs from the long, gold rope around her neck. (She loves elephants, which are, of course, native to her home country, and supports NGOs fighting to protect them from hunting, poaching and habitat loss.) "I come from a very patriarchal world, but not within my family. My dad listened to my mom. My mom held her own. There was never a sense of her deflecting from my father. She had the power to say no to things, and I saw her hold that power."

The waitress returns with our drinks and we order food – for her, green eggs and lamb. "I always get the same thing," she says. She has a mellifluous voice and speaks in an elegant tone that moves easily between the jocular and sincere. Her eyes are big and expressive, and she has her hair pulled back in a bun. She was wearing her hair in a similar fashion last fall, she says, during a photo shoot for the UK magazine *Grazia*. When she saw herself on the cover, after publication, she was shocked. The photographer had edited out her kinky, coily hair so it appeared that she had a smooth buzz cut. She took to Instagram (where she currently has six million followers) and posted before and after pictures. "I am disappointed that @GraziaUK invited me to be on their cover and then edited out and smoothed my hair to fit their notion of what beautiful hair looks like." She added the hashtag #dtmh, as in, "don't touch my hair" – a phrase made famous by Solange Knowles' single of the same name on her last album (a brilliant, fierce, and profound meditation on her and her family's experiences as African-Americans). Hundreds of thousands of people liked it. *Grazia* and the photographer who was responsible for the airbrushing have since apologized.

"My hair is something that, historically, has been

shunned," she says. "I mean, how often do you hear 'You can't get a job with hair like that?'" I ask if that's still true. "Oh, yes," she says. "Natural, African, kinky hair—it's often been painted as uncivilized or wild." On Instagram, she added to her initial post, writing, "Being featured on the cover of a magazine fulfills me, as it is an opportunity to show other dark, kinky-haired people, and particularly our children, that they are beautiful just the way they are."

To that end, she has written a children's book named *Sulwe*, which Simon & Schuster will publish in early 2019. "I thought I'd write it over a weekend. I was humbled. It took two years." The book tells the story of a little girl and how she comes to accept her dark complexion. She decided to write it back in 2014, after giving a speech at the Essence Black Women in Hollywood awards. "It was about having dark skin in a world that favors traditional Western standards of beauty – light complexions and silky hair – and my own journey from insecurity to a place of self-acceptance." The speech traveled like wildfire. "I was touched by how it had resonated with so many people of color, and not just black Africans. I started to realize that

there was a demographic that really needed to hear this message but wouldn't hear my speech. I wanted to get to kids before they reach an age where the world is telling them they are not as valuable."

Nyong'o became the first black woman to represent Lancôme after signing a major endorsement deal in 2014, representing a shift for the brand toward what she diplomatically described at the time as "the idea that beauty should not be dictated, but should instead be an

expression of a woman's freedom to be herself." Her recent Calvin Klein campaign, for its new fragrance, Women, sees her pictured alongside two female icons, chosen by Nyong'o for their influence on her – Katharine Hepburn and Eartha Kitt. "By defying their times, they defined their times," she says. "I want to emulate that."

Nyong'o was born in Mexico City but grew up in Nairobi, in a large and politically prominent family. "We're extremely close," she says. She had 12 aunts who were always about. "Some of them were trippy," she says, laughing. "But together they gave me a really good base of what womanhood is and can be." Nyong'o's sense of style developed early; closet staples included red corduroy skirted overalls and a sweet, flowery, purple-and-pink dress that she proceeds to describe in detail. "I wore it to every event. It's kinda still the style I wear today," she says.

While in primary school, she loved to play make believe. "My mom would call me a space cadet because I would veer off into my own world. I could spend hours by myself." While attending a private Catholic primary school, she >

"I love acting because I enjoy experiencing the world through other people's eyes"



Top, \$495, pants, \$495,
hat, \$450, and belt, \$295,
all by Marc Jacobs

SCAN & SHOP THESE
LOOKS WITH THE
NET-A-PORTER APP

Hair Vernon Francois At
The Visionaries Agency
using Vernon Francois.
Makeup Nick Barose at
Exclusive Artists using
Lancôme. Nails Deborah
Lippmann at Starworks
Group. Set design
Philipp Haemmerle.
Production Hen's Tooth
Production. Shot on
location in New York
City, May 21, 2018.

had recurring nightmares about the Red Devil cartoon character on the packaging of her favorite ice-lolly. In her imagination he turned into a full-fledged villain who terrorized her from a tributary of the Nairobi River that ran across campus. “The Red Devil came for me almost every night,” she says. “He was always lurking in the rain trenches that ran outside our house.”

Away from her imagined world, real danger surrounded her family. Her father, Peter Ayang’ Nyong’o, an academic who taught political science at the University of Nairobi, and his brother Charles were impassioned and public opponents of Kenya’s repressive and authoritarian president at the time. In 1980, Charles was believed to have been murdered as a consequence of his political activism. No one has ever been charged, but Peter took it as a message. He fled to Mexico and got a job as a visiting professor at the local university. His family joined him the following year, and Nyong’o, the second of six children, was born; her name is the diminutive of Guadalupe. Although Nyong’o returned to Kenya before she turned one year old, her father remained in political exile until 1987. After he returned, he continued his opposition campaign and was detained on several occasions.

Although her parents tried to shield her from what was going on – she didn’t know, for instance, that when he went away sometimes, her father was actually in jail – she knew something was wrong. She remembers watching family members burn her father’s papers and days when her mother kept her home from school with the curtains drawn; it was not safe for them to leave.

Still, her childhood was a relatively happy one, with an atmosphere of normality at home. She was a drama kid from the start. “At my church, I would gather all the children and make up plays over the holidays. I’m so glad there were no camera phones at the time. Those things would be haunting me right now. Some things you just need to grow through.” In high school, she found that she learned better when she acted out what she was studying, such as the sciences. “We acted out the heart. Literally. As in, this is the artery,” she says, dramatically raising her right arm like a dancer to indicate the vessel, “and this is the vein,” extending her left arm down. “My whole body was involved.”

When she was 16, she starred in a semi-professional production of *Romeo and Juliet* with a cast comprised of children and adults. “She was really driven and focused,” Saheem Ali, a friend from back then tells me by phone. He played Mercutio. “The director said I could go home when I was finished, but I remember staying so I could watch Lupita do her speech in the tomb. She was that captivating.” After the play, they lost touch, but reconnected in recent years through a mutual friend in New York. “It’s been amazing to see her navigate this abrupt shift and still be the same person she was 20 years ago.”

Before college, Nyong’o and her sister returned to Mexico to take a seven-month language course in Guerrero state. “My whole outlook and sense of self is Kenyan,” she tells me. “But my mom made a point of letting me know that I was born someplace else, so I always felt an affinity, a need to get to know that place. [CONTINUED ON PAGE 266]



[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 133] I was the only one in my family born there. It was the thing that made me special,” she adds, with a little smile.

For university, Nyong’o attended Hampshire College, in Massachusetts, largely because her father was close to a few professors who taught there. She majored in film and African studies. “My idea was to go to an Ivy league school but it was too expensive,” she says. (She realized her dream eventually, attending Yale for graduate school.) “Hampshire was very generous. But I was apprehensive about the experience. It’s a place where you have to design your own major. You just made it up. I didn’t like it. I came from a lot of structure, and I didn’t understand this thing of doing whatever you wanted. But what I learned was invaluable: to depend on myself, to self-generate and self-motivate. I learned self-discipline because it wasn’t being imposed on me.”

After graduating, she moved to New York and got an administrative job, while occasionally pursuing minor acting and modeling gigs. She felt increasingly unhappy and lost. When she turned 24, she had a quarter-life crisis. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, so I went home to sit down with myself and figure things out. I remembered that I had a home and people who loved me.” Her mother gave her a self-help book written by a friend. Then, on a family trip in the savannah, surrounded by elephants, she finally admitted to herself that she wanted to be an actress.

She returned to the US to attend Yale School of Drama, a three-year program whose alumni include Meryl Streep and Frances McDormand. She beat nearly 1,000 other applicants for one of the coveted 15 spots in her class. Her professor, Yionoulis, also says that she stood out for “her grace, her poise, her real commitment to craft, her generosity to her fellow students. She had a real sense of kindness. You can tell when someone genuinely cares about the successes of classmates as well as their own. Lupita was always one of those people. She was a consensus builder.” One of her particularly memorable performances was of a devil, her childhood tormentor, in the Gertrude Stein play, *Dr Faustus Lights the*

Lights. “She was very sinewy and seductive and wonderful,” says Yionoulis. “She literally made that devil her own.”

Immediately after graduation in 2012, she was cast in *12 Years a Slave*. “It was very surreal. I was riddled with anxiety,” she says. “I felt like a total imposter: ‘How am I with these people who I’ve watched while growing up?’ Every day I had to tell myself that it didn’t matter *who* is playing this part, it’s more *what* is the part they are playing? I don’t know Michael Fassbender, but I *can* know Master Epps.” Filming in the hot New Orleans summer was especially grueling – long, 109°F days of intense focus and pain, but joy too.

After winning an Academy Award for the performance in 2014, she became terrified by the supposed Oscars curse, when winners see their careers plummet. “I remember sitting in a pitch meeting for some comedy show. They said, ‘What if we do a skit about what’s going to happen to Lupita? And then we have you go down all the wrong roads all other Oscar winners before you have gone down.’ I said, ‘That’s my nightmare. There is nothing funny about that.’” She shakes her head, laughing quietly. “I got so many offers for slave roles,” she continues, rolling her eyes. “I didn’t want to do any of them. I did not want to be pigeon-holed.” She found the pressure of deciding what to do next intense. “There’s that thing: ‘You gotta catch your wind! This is your moment!’ It’s suddenly all about what people expect you to do.” So she retreated, and took time to listen to just herself.

“I had to reacquaint myself with the possibility of failure and be OK with it. And I had to free myself from needing to maintain an ‘A’ because it wasn’t in the pursuit of an ‘A’ that I got to that point. When I did *12 Years* I was not expecting accolades, I was just trying to play Patsey to the best of my abilities. So I kept reminding myself of the thing that I needed to invest my time in – my craft. And that’s why I did *Star Wars*.” It’s true that it didn’t seem like the most obvious professional segue at the time, but as with everything Nyong’o does, there was a

“There’s a separation between the *public* and the *private*. In the arena where I’m being *desired*, I’m absent”

purpose to it. “What J.J. [Abrams, the director] offered me was a chance to play a character that did not depend on my body,” she explains. “I could still work, but not be *seen*,” she says, with another big belly laugh. “I really wanted that.”

Apart from the *Star Wars* franchise, and before she started training for her next blockbuster *Black Panther*, she starred in the *Jungle Book* (voice only) and *Queen of Katwe*, a film set in Uganda about a young girl who is a chess prodigy. She also made her Broadway debut in *Eclipsed*, a play set in 2003 about five Liberian women who have survived their country’s second civil war.

However it was *Black Panther* that proved to be the most intense and exhausting, but also exhilarating, shooting experience. The cast knew they had something special. “We’d never seen something like this,” Nyong’o says. “We knew it was going to be dope.” She sets her fork down, her eyes widening. “But we could not have predicted just how clamorous and passionate the response would be. There was just an *ownership!* People grabbed that film and ran with it: paying for strangers to go see the film; dressing up for the cinema; embracing their culture, and not just African culture. In South Korea, all the interviewers for our press junket came dressed in their national garb from all around Asia.” The discourse the film began between Africans and African-Americans, she says, has also been thrilling. “I was in Nigeria not long after the film came out,” she says, “and one man said to me, ‘How are my cousins, Boseman and Jordan?’” (As in her co-stars – Chadwick Boseman and Michael B Jordan.) “I had never heard that sentiment come out of an African’s mouth. It started a long overdue conversation about our shared identities.”

During the long afterglow – or after-glare – of the film’s release, in between all her other projects, Nyong’o, who works out with a trainer most days of the week, made time to go on a 10-day silent retreat at a Vipassana meditation center. “I learned so much in there. It blew my mind. All you are doing is learning this technique of meditation. It was the hardest 10 days of my life. It was also the most restful 10 days.” She continues to meditate daily. “It makes all the difference,” she says. And, she no longer suffers from insomnia. “Stress is what makes me an insomniac. And I’m a stress-buster, man.”

Someone walking outside catches her eye. “I thought it was a friend who is supposed to be out of town,” she says. Nyong’o seems content living in Brooklyn. “I like that I can call a friend down the street to go the farmer’s market. The other day I was watching *The Shining*

(Nyong’o, who admits to being easily frightened, has been watching a lot of scary movies as she prepares for her role in *Us*). “The credits came up, and I’m like, ‘OK, I need company, I can’t be alone.’ I called my friend and he came over immediately.” Saheem Ali, the friend from Nairobi who now lives in Manhattan, tells me that Nyong’o would do the exactly the same for him. “She is a fiercely loyal friend,” he says. “When you need her, she will drop everything and be there. She is a person of her word.”

While she has made Brooklyn home, she misses her family, and recently traveled to Kenya for the first time in two years to be with them. “Everyone has babies! There’s a whole new generation that I feel like I don’t know. I just had to go and spend time with them.” She, too, wants to be a mother one day, but it’s not her current priority. I ask her if she’s in love. “Nobody has asked me that before.” She smiles slyly. “Very sneaky. I see you.” She pauses before answering. “OK. I’m not,” she finally says, then reconsiders. “I’m madly in love with my niece. I see pictures and videos of her in Tanzania, and I think my heart will burst. I love her to death, and she doesn’t even know it.”

I ask her how it feels to be intensely loved and desired by so many people all over the world. “You’d be surprised. I think there’s a separation between the public and the private. In the arena where I’m being desired, I’m absent. Most of the time, I’m actually not there.” Her digital Casio watch starts beeping, alerting her to finish up. “The only thing that matters is the private – seeing someone eye-to-eye,” she says. “Desire from afar is just news.” ■