6. ESSENTIAL BY EMILY STRONG

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW:

What makes you feel beautiful?

"I feel beautiful and my best when I'm naked. No makeup, no jewelry, hair out, in a quiet room or greenhouse, surrounded by the sounds of Mother Nature."

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Age 32
Assigned Sex Female
Pronouns She/Her
Gender Identity Female
Race African American

What is your gender identity? Please describe

Female. Tomboy if that is still an accepted term. I love aspects about all genders.

What does femininity mean to you? Masculinity? How do you relate to these terms? How do these concepts impact the way you present yourself?

Fem was forced upon me since I was little and for multiple traumatizing reasons. I rebelled as much as possible except for the aspects that I liked and chose to express for myself. Masculinity was also both a positive and negative influence in my life. From being a Black tomboy in a predominantly White community that only saw Black people one way. From what was perceived on news channels, to being pursued in a threatening manner, or for sexual purposes, from multiple races but mainly from the White and Black community. I was targeted multiple times and am also a victim of rape. But sadly, it was because of the way society taught little Black boys how

to act, both by themselves and around others. This was an issue that was a taboo topic within the Black community. The fascination of educated Black girls, especially ones who are 'nerds' or 'geeks', or 'plain'...anything that was labeled as "for White people only". I felt sorry for him. He never found someone of his race that loved anime, wasn't a forced stereotype, and could 'hang with the boys' without jealousy or other issues.

I hated gender roles and norms, but also never knew how to accept myself. My narcissistic mother wanted me to be the perfect, obedient fem slave and my father never got the son he always wanted. So I was the replacement, and became the outlet for his failings in life. I became both, and I loved it. I wanted to express myself in multiple ways and not just the stereotypical way that was associated with my assigned sex at birth and ethnicity. I was tired of being ridiculed for basic uncontrollable bodily functions such as burping or passing gas. I would always be ridiculed for whistling, which was labeled as a 'masculine' trait.

What is your racial identity?

African American.

Have there been times in your life when your race has influenced how others have treated you?

Multiple times, for the good and bad depending on the situation. One aspect from these situations is Code Switching. I cannot vouch for other ethnicities but as Afro Americans, we are taught this indirectly. When in the presence of anyone outside of your home, you are to act as if perfectly educated, well put together, blend in as well as you can, in hopes of succeeding in life. Basically, a survival tactic.

And sort of along the lines of the same old school tactics used in earlier times. For example, the type of thinking that was forced upon Females to make their homes look as perfect as the first day they bought it and to hide all of their belongings as took look like no one lives in this house. And this was also somehow taught this way of living was to make sure, your friends coming into your house was not supposed to make them feel inadequate or if you have 'friends' who are ones that love to copy your aesthetic for their own purposes since they do not have the ability to be their own individuals or the opposite, and to 'snoop around' and gossip about their finds to a separate or same social group that you are in to gain a higher status within said group.

But as an example in my case, if I act younger, less knowledgeable and cute, then I will most likely get a positive motherly/fatherly reaction or one less harsh than what was going to be dealt to me. Same goes with the tone in my voice. If I speak in a softer bubbly voice, I receive a more laid back and accepting reaction, versus using my actual lower tone of voice, where the person on the receiving end has to go through a series of reactions within their mind to give an 'acceptable and hopefully not overly judgmental' tone.

Even to this day, I use my actual tone to signify my age and experience, nonverbally, compared to my much higher younger sounding tone, where even though I would get a more favorable response, it comes with the possibility of being perceived that I am too young to have

experienced anything in life and need unwarranted advice and direction. And it also comes with unfavorable ignorant responses that are taught to be 'less racist/ignorant etc', such as 'Oh, you're so nice for what or who you are or your kind! You're so well spoken! I didn't know your kind liked animals, different kinds of food, shows, music, or anything that was not labeled a Black trait'. I have even lost jobs because of this. Where I simply and calmly questioned their supposed 'compliment' and I received an extremely harsh reaction such as, 'I don't know! Why do you people also have to question everything we say?! This is why our races can't get along because you can't take a simple compliment?!' Even though it wasn't a compliment at all and it showed your ignorance and bias plain and simple. 'Black people only listen to one type of music: Rap. I think you knew who Lady Gaga or Katy Perry was or even Queen?!'

Have you felt pressured to change your appearance by close family and/or friends?

Friends never, but family yes. My family had always had a hold on how I was supposed to present myself and my gender. I was a 'girl' but also Black, so I must wear these specific things. I hated dresses and skirts for the longest time. I was a Tomboy and I wanted to wear jeans, especially bell bottoms. Going to Catholic School was the bane of my existence. Every time I had to buy a uniform, they would barely fit and it lowered my self esteem every time. My friends always supported me no matter what I wanted to be. My family,unfortunately, had another agenda - the community norms they wanted to stick to out of fear.

Have you felt pressured to change your appearance by people you know only casually or by business associates?

Both, especially random strangers. I've had peers, teachers, and random people in a store or on the street treat me like a pet that needed to wear clothes to suit their needs. I've had my hair extensions pulled out of my head in the hallway at school just so everyone, including teachers could laugh at me because it was something they had never experienced. They were afraid of asking, afraid of change within their community. I had my hair chemically straightened so I would look more acceptable to my peers and fellow employers. That was still never enough. I would get fired from a job over 'Not meeting the criteria of being more white and less black for it was too intimidating and seems too 'thug'.'

Have there been times in your life where you felt insecure about your appearance?

Everyday, even to this day. I try to change that way of thinking by making a few changes in my life and creating boundaries.

Have you felt pressured to change your appearance by the media? What aspects of the media have impacted your self-perception the most? Commercial? Social? Other?

I wasn't allowed to watch certain types of media or listen to much music besides Oldies 99.9. I was only influenced by what my mother would force me to wear or buy me with minimal intervention. The most influence that came to me was when my mother started forcing me to attend talent groups in hopes I would become a star and get rich enough to care for her for the rest of my life.

I always had a deep rooted hatred for being as dark as I am and even more so towards anyone darker than me. The typical beauty standard was what got attention and I felt that I would never succeed because of that or anyone in my community. It wasn't until college that I tried to change my image to what would be best accepted in the media, or at least the modeling and acting community. But with age and some extra traumatic experiences and burnout, I slowly began to give that up to try to find what I wanted to be.

Do you do anything to alter your natural appearance? (tattoos, piercings, hair dyeing, makeup, etc) If so, why?

I've mainly always had an attraction to tattoos mainly,and then secondly to piercings - but unfortunately this is some sort of coping mechanism and excuse to not self-harm because of depression, anxiety and burnout. Hair-dyeing was particularly scary for me, especially since Curly/Nappy hair care was not a thing until later. I always had the fear of my hair falling out and being perceived as an example of how ugly black people are even when bald.

I never had a huge interest in makeup but I did love the art aspect of it and the many ways to use it. Not just to look pretty for some editorial magazine. I have more of an interest now than I did back then, but it was freeing when I stopped wearing makeup everyday to feel pretty for the public and not me. My skin cleared up as well, so it gave me an extra reason to dial it back. I'm also allergic to a lot of makeup and with age, it is becoming worse.

What makes you feel beautiful? What makes you feel empowered?

I feel beautiful and my best when I'm naked. No makeup. No jewelry. Hair out. In a quiet room or greenhouse, surrounded by the sounds of mother nature.

How have your family and close friends been supportive of your appearance and self-perception?

Most of my family have not been supportive of my appearance since I was 11. Only a few who were open-minded were supportive of my transformation through the years of finding myself. Especially after being groomed by my mother to be her forever supportive modern day princess trapped at home. Many of my friends have always been supportive and would give me feedback about anything that I asked them about. Whether it was dying my hair, bodybuilding, piercings, tattoos, or other lifestyle changes. Even if it wasn't their cup of tea, they did not project or manipulate my decisions based on what they liked or not.

Have you had any positive experiences with casual acquaintances or business associates that impacted your self-perception in a positive way?

Some casual acquaintances in stores or passing by on the street would actually praise my choices. Whether it was me wearing my Kigurumi out in public and not on Halloween, or dressing comfortably and not over feminine. Especially when they are basing their projections as to what they have seen on television of how Black people are 'supposed' to dress or act in person.

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