

9. SOVEREIGNTY BY EMILY STRONG

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW REGARDING PRESSURE TO EMBODY EXTREMES:

"There's no middle ground, there's no room for compromise. Compromise is not a word in today's society. I feel like I'm compromised, but I feel like I'm in this space where my racial ties, my political ties, my religious ties, my identity ties are all because of social media, because of society pulling me in different directions. And we wonder why there's so much contention in the world right now, when people are being pulled in – 'What's going to trump what, what part of myself is going to trump the other?' and that's where I feel like a lot of unhappiness, and resentment, and rage comes from.

Not that there's not injustice in the world, because there's always been injustice, but rather people are unhappy with themselves because they're being pulled in 20,000 different directions. Which part of me is going to win? Is the color of my skin gonna win out? Is then my whole life going to be defined by my skin tone? Is how I'm fighting for my racial rights, fighting on the front lines for people of my skin color, is that going to be my life? Is it my religious ties? Am I going to denounce everything that my religion says to denounce and fully commit myself to that, and then everything else falls to the wayside? Why is it that I have to choose all these different things, when all of these different things make up who I am? So, that's kind of where I feel like I am and I feel like a lot of people are. But, it's hard to say that, because to say that means you are not an extreme and right now, the world wants extremes."

FULL INTERVIEW:

Age 27

Assigned Sex Male

Pronouns He/Him

Gender Identity Male

Race Latino, Puerto Rican, French

So, if you wouldn't mind talking a little bit more about your gender identity, if you could describe it in a little more detail?

I'm a straight-ish, pansexual male, I guess. My gender identity is kind of based in the fact that I fully connect with it, in a sense, where I've... I was, a few years ago, kind of confused as to where I stood, and I had this revelatory moment where I am who I've always been, in a sense, and it kind of solidified to me that I identify with what I was born as. So, to me that's what feels natural, because that's what I was essentially born as, and so who am I to change what the universe or God gave me? This is who I am, and I fully embrace that. What I was born as is just what my gender is, as my experience.

Was there a time when you were sort of questioning whether or not you felt that was most natural to you?

Yeah, there was a moment where I came to this point where a lot of my mannerisms and my expressions are very - in the eyes of society - feminine and not masculine. So, it caused me to question the fact of whether or not my identity was tied to those mannerisms, or was my identity tied to my natural birth gender. I wasn't sure if society's preconceptions of my mannerisms and the way I expressed myself hindered what I viewed as my gender and my identity as a whole. It took me a while to realize that just because I act a certain way doesn't mean that it designates me a certain way; that I needed to fit in what the society was telling me that I should.

We often relate effeminate men to homosexuality, or you know, either we tell them to knock it off, or we tell them to embrace it in this certain way. There's no middle ground where you can still be this and that without having to compromise on what you were initially born as. You could just be a male that is a feminine without having to identify as something else.

So, I had to come to this realization where I had to be comfortable with myself and not rely on what people were telling me how I should feel, how I should identify, or even kind of giving me allowances. Like, 'Oh, you can feel however you want to feel, you don't have to stick to something, you know'. And for other people that might be freeing, but for me, it kind of was feeling like, 'No, I don't want to use that as an excuse to not find out who I am. I wanted to find out who I am and what I felt most comfortable with'. And, to me, that kind of felt like a cop out. Like, I could just be whatever I want, but it didn't feel right for me. It felt like I needed to find out what felt right for me, and what felt right was identifying as my gender identity, what I was born as: a male.

So, could you talk a little bit more about what femininity and masculinity mean to you, and how that relates to your identity and how you see yourself?

I feel like there's more social constructs that we've made to be polar opposites of each other, when in fact, they are kind of one in the same. We are people first, and how we act shouldn't be classified as masculine or feminine, but rather, that this is just how you express yourself. It shouldn't be feminine or masculine, it should be gentle or strong. You might be strong in these aspects, but you might be gentle in these aspects. You might be more forgiving in these aspects, but you might be more stubborn in these.

There's so much more, which is so much more defined than trying to blanket-statement things, blanket-statement people and how they act. I'd rather take a person for who they are and say, well, you act very gently towards children, towards relationships, towards people, you know, you're very forgiving, and in society that may be classified as feminine features, but I'd rather classify them as gentle, forgiving, caring, compassionate, and build somebody up in that sense, rather than make a blanket statement; than call them feminine, you know? Or, they're headstrong, brazen, rash, strong in a sense, where they have mental fortitude. Like, nothing can bring them down. People classify that as more masculine, but I'd rather give them credit, I'd rather give a person credit than kind of wash away all of who they are by just blanket-stating them as feminine or masculine.

So for me, I had to take all of who I was and strip away that mentality of feminine/masculine and say, 'What am I? What do I fall under? This: I'm gentle towards my family, I'm caring towards my

nieces and nephews. I very much care about their wellbeing and I'm very nurturing to them. But, I'm also very headstrong. So, I had to take my whole being and strip away this mentality of masculine/feminine, and embrace myself as a person rather than a societal construct, in a sense, you know?

So, could you talk a little bit more about your racial identity?

I am Latino, Puerto Rican, and French. Actually, I found out recently that I have French in me, and our actual last name isn't what it is. It's actually —. My father's last name is hyphenated, and he just found that out because it's on his birth certificate. We needed his birth certificate for something, and our last name hyphenated, —. So, his mother or father who had his mother, apparently, her maiden name was hyphenated —, and she wanted to keep it. There's a strong lineage on my dad's mother's side of French. I didn't even know, I think my dad knew it, but didn't know it was on his birth certificate. So yeah, it's interesting.

So for me, my racial identity doesn't play a huge part. We have our culture, it's a big part of my life as a whole, but the color of my skin so much doesn't compute in my brain, because that's just how I am. When there's moments where people pointed out, it's kind of like, 'Oh, yeah, I have brown skin', like it doesn't have weight until it's brought up. For me, it's just my way of existing, but then when someone points it out, it's kind of like, oh, yeah, you know, this is how the world is. This is how I look to the world. My internal landscape, my own way of processing things, doesn't go through the filter of my race until someone points out that this is how things should be because of my race.

Whenever it is brought up, it's kind of a hard thing to process; that there's certain places where it matters what I am, and in fact, when it matters it's because I'm less-than to them. So, when it's brought up, it's always in the light of a negative thing, like when I used to work retail, customers will come up to me, or not want to be talking to me because of my racial identity, or what I say to them. But in my mind, I'm just a person. And so I'm hit with that fact over and over and over again that my race, the way I look to them, is who I am. To them, I'm defined by how I look, by the color of my skin. It's kind of a rough thing to go through every single time, because my racial identity is that I'm a person, I don't really have so much of a concept of my race affecting anything until it's shoved in my face. So, that's how I view it. I don't know.

It's interesting because, yeah, your skin is a bit darker than your average Caucasian person, but you were just saying you have French prominently in your background, too, but people can't know that just from looking at you and assuming things.

Yeah, they wouldn't know that I have a little bit of Caucasian in me, but they wouldn't care. How I appear is how I am. There's no ifs, ands, or buts, and the people who really care about that are usually the people that view people of other races less than their own. That could be people of not just Caucasian descent, but other descendants, because I've had, you know, people from Africa look down on me because I'm brown, or have a lighter shade than them. And so, to them, being of a lighter shade means I am less-than to them.

It's kind of a unique experience, where a lot of the racial divides in the country are Black versus White, but there's these middle people, the Browns, where we are neither here nor there. We can't identify with White culture in a sense, but we can't identify with Black culture, and so we are often in this limbo space where we can kind of get it from either side, where, White skinned people say, 'Oh, well, you're a person of color, we don't want anything to do with you'. But then there is the opposite end, where, 'You don't identify with our struggles'. The Black community is like, 'You don't identify with our struggles, so you can't be a part of us'. So, it's two opposing factions that often leave out these middle people.

It's crazy to kind of feel like I'm not a part of it until it's brought to my attention. It's an interesting kind of segue, because you feel like you have to be an ally of either one or the other. You don't have your own stance, because you have to identify with either one side or the other. You have to be an ally of one side or the other, but there's no space for you. You know, it's Black versus White, there's no middle ground. And so often these people, not just Browns, but Asians and other ethnic groups, are kind of displaced and they don't know where they stand and often hate both sides. They often shun both sides, because they can't deal with either, because there's no place for them.

Yeah, that sounds really difficult. It does seem like, just from having met your family, it seems like you have a pretty strong, close-knit, at least family, blood-relation connection. But I would imagine in general culture, it's difficult to feel like you're being pushed one way or the other, and pushed out on both sides.

Yeah. I think that's why in a lot of Hispanic households, family is everything, because there's nothing else out there. You know, society has already dictated that it's Blacks versus Whites. There's a place for White people, and then there's a place for Black people, but there's no necessarily place for, you know, Hispanics. So, family then becomes everything, because there's no community as a whole, there is your family and that's it. So, I think that's what causes Hispanic households to be so close-knit, because there's not much else out there. You can go to Black community centers and stuff like that and find a family there if you don't have one, or even more, there's outlets for people to go to that allow them to have a community as an extension past your family, but there's not much for Hispanics and the people in between those two opposing ends, you know?

Do you feel like things changed at all in the way that people approached you, given the kind of rhetoric that President Trump used during his time as president?

In all honesty, no, because I feel like it's been the same before him and it's been the same after him. I feel like there might be more awareness of the fact because of his presidency, there's now an emphasis on it. Let me rephrase that; there's more emphasis in the political realm on it. There's more eyes on it in the political realm, but in day-to-day life, I feel like not much has changed, because people are still going to be who they are, regardless of, you know, who's in the office. There's still KKK people, regardless of the fact that Barack Obama was our president, right? How people treated me in my day-to-day life did not necessarily change because of who it was. In the political realm, there were more eyes and there's more awareness of the fact of political injustices

and stuff like that, because people had to feel it. They felt more need to speak up, but I feel like in people's day-to-day lives, it was pretty much the same.

I still met certain levels of scrutiny, I still felt like I had to prove myself in certain aspects of my life. Or had to kind of silence myself, like I've had customers who've accused me of stealing things, and I've had to shrink myself back, because I had to make myself appear innocent - even though I was - I had to make myself present myself in a certain fashion. And, I had to allow other people to handle the situation, because I couldn't. Because of the color of my skin. So, it's in those moments where, who is president doesn't necessarily hold weight, because this is me as a person dealing with another person- as a person.

You know, maybe they felt emboldened because of the political climate and everything like that. They may have felt like they had a bigger voice than they actually do have, but it's still my everyday life. It's not like it was someone wearing a MAGA hat intruding into my life. It was just that I was at a register, and a person, not even Caucasian, but rather someone Indian, or it could have been anybody that accused me. But it's interesting, because, yeah, more often than not, it was a Caucasian person and they probably did have, from their demeanor, they probably did have a pro-Trump background.

But, it's interesting because a lot of my Hispanic extended family was for Trump, and they see something in him that most news media outlets didn't necessarily cover. Or, the society as a whole pretty much stripped them of their minority card, in a sense, because they're voting for Trump. But, a lot of them liked Trump, a lot of them supported Trump. A lot of them still support him even now, even though everyone's telling them it's over, they're still clinging to some fabric of hope. But, it's their experience day to day life, they're still going to encounter racism, regardless of the fact that they are a Trump supporter or not, because it's not so much who you're supporting, it's the color of your skin. These people, regardless of where they come from, are going to hate on somebody because of the color of their skin. And maybe they do feel emboldened by him, but in my everyday day-to-day life, it hasn't been that experience. Not that it's not out there, but in my personal experience, I can say that it necessarily made a huge impact, because they, regardless, are still racist.

So, this next question can relate to the color of your skin, but also body image, how you dress, and how you present yourself. Have there been times in your life when you felt insecure about how you appear?

Yes, it's only been maybe the past two years that I've not cared about how I dress, how I appear to people. Because of my mannerisms, and because of my cultural background - in my culture, a man is supposed to be a strong man. They're supposed to be machismo, you know, macho-men, and to be caring or nurturing or anything associated with feminine qualities was a huge no-no. You were designated to wear certain colors, if you branched out beyond those colors, you were considered, you know, gay. Regardless of whether or not you were interested in men, you were just classified as such. In certain households, Hispanic households, and as a whole, you could be abused for that. Not that my family would, but I know my extended family would view me a certain way.

So, growing up, I wore pretty much the same thing; I wore a black shirt, a black sweater, baggy jeans, and that's that. I felt like I had to hide myself in a sense, because I didn't want a red shirt, because a red shirt would mean that I'm asking for attention and could give my family the wrong idea. Or, to get a more form fitting shirt would be the same thing. I'm asking for attention, and not the right kind. So, it made me feel very insecure about who I was, and what I wanted to be, because I felt like I had to, not that I had to, but I felt like I had to, you know, not prove everyone right. You know, because growing up, people in middle school would call me gay, would call me all these things because of what I was interested in and how I acted. And so, to prove them wrong, I had to dress a certain way.

Now, I've come to the point where what I wear is not contingent on who I am, but rather what I want to wear is what I want to wear. I could wear whatever I want to wear, and it has no bearings on how I identify. It could help express what I am, but it's not contingent on who I am. So, I can wear a pink cardigan, with a pushpin on it, and it doesn't bear any weight on what I identify as and who I know I am. It's taken me a very long time, but I've just gotten into this season of my life where I don't care. People look at me funny, but I'm gonna wear what I want to wear.

Even within the context of my culture, I feel like things have taken a certain turn where the men in Hispanic households now kind of have a certain level of freedom to express themselves however they want to. They are still looked at to be like, 'the head of the household', you know, the man of the house, but how they are the man of the house is much different than how they used to be in my dad's dad's age. So now, I can kind of wear whatever I want, not because of people telling me to, but rather me telling myself I'm allowed to. It's a great place to be, honestly, because before my closet was full of black everything. And very baggy. But now, it's every single color there is and it feels like I can breathe, and breathe freely. As opposed to before, I had to hold my breath whenever I chose clothes, because if I breathe a sigh of relief, it's dangerous in a sense, you know? Everything that I was feeling or who I was could have been a huge no-no.

So you talked a little bit about general pressures, cultural pressures, but have there been times when you were pressured to change your appearance by your close family or friends?

For sure. My mom, still to this day. She's gotten better over the years, but when she was in charge, and it was her money buying new clothes, I could not at all want anything remotely close to feminine anything. If I wanted fitting jeans, that was a no, I had to get super baggy so that my body was covered. If I wanted a shirt, it had to be two sizes up, it couldn't be my size. And at the same time, money was tight growing up, so I had to rely on what she could afford. So I had to, within the context of choosing, I had to kind of let her decide and what she chose was dark blues, blacks. I couldn't ask for anything more. I couldn't want a pink cardigan, I couldn't want a red shirt. I couldn't want something more.

I remember once when I was growing up, I wanted red Converse, because I saw a character on the show have them, and they looked so cool, and they ran so fast. But, it was a girl character. That was a huge no. I remember fighting her tooth and nail to get it, and it was a big no. I remember growing up, I was interested in Sailor Moon, and my dad had bought me Sailor Moon

toys. And obviously, they're not geared for boys, they're like dolls. Yeah, my mom blew a gasket and tossed them immediately. And any stuffed toy that I had, tossed immediately.

So, what I had was - I was interested in two different things. I was interested in the action figures, the Power Rangers, the boy stuff, but I also liked these things; these more girly things. I liked Barbie's, I like these dolls, I liked plush toys. I liked these things and I had to either find a different way to get them, or I did not have them. And if I did have them, I had to hide them, because they were a big no-no. Now that I'm older and I have my own money and I get to decide where that money goes into, I get to choose if I have them or not.

My mom was old-school, too. She grew up on the streets; you didn't show weakness or any form of love or attachment. That was a huge no, because those were liabilities on the streets. You can die because of those things, so she was trained differently. But, I understood where my mom was coming from, so I never faulted her for that.

Now that I'm older, whenever I buy something that's a feminine, I buy a plushie or I buy something that's pink, or classified as a feminine, she questions it, but doesn't fight it. She'd be like, 'Do you really want that?' I'd be like, 'Yes, I really do'. She'd be like, 'Alright, then get it, you know, I'm not gonna fight you go ahead'. And so, she's come a long way and I think it took a lot for both of us to get to a place where we're comfortable. It was always a fight with my mom. Not ever really my dad, my dad was kind of like... he knew what I was interested in. He would often be the one that would buy me a plush toy, the Sailor Moon dolls, the thing that I wasn't supposed to have, and try to sneak it to me, but then my mom would be the one who was no; when usually it's like the, the reverse.

That's interesting, because I would have thought that the male presence would be sort of reinforcing the masculine stereotypes, but not in this case.

Well, my parents' relationship is very non-traditional. My mom is the breadwinner, and my dad is the homemaker. He's the one who cooks, cleans, takes care of the house and all that good stuff, and my mom is the one who manages the money, who does the budgeting, who makes the money and all that good stuff. So, she took on more of a masculine role, while my dad was the one who took on the more, 'feminine role'. And so it's always been interesting to me, where in most Hispanic households, it's a complete flip. But, it was really my dad who was the more nurturing one, in a sense.

So, you mentioned your peers in middle school were pretty rough with policing your appearance, but are there any other moments that you recall where casual acquaintances or business associates pressured you to change the way that you present or appear?

Yes actually. When I was working in retail not that long ago, I was wearing black pants and they shrunk in the wash. They were relatively tight, but they were the only black pants that I had for work. And I just recently got more form-fitting clothes, because I'm getting more used to my body. So, I wanted to wear something more form-fitting, so my outfit was very form-fitting, and I felt a little bit uncomfortable, but I was getting used to the idea that that's okay. And a bunch of my

work associates pointed it out, and pointed out my very feminine features on my body and said, 'Is a man really a man if he shows off his curves and shows off his body like that?' Like they were calling into question my sexuality. Not even directly to me, but while I'm there in the shop. So, they're commenting on the fact of how tight my clothes were and actually told my bosses that maybe I shouldn't wear those pants again, maybe I shouldn't wear those clothes again, because they weren't very flattering.

Mind you, some of my work people were much older, like, much older, so I get why, but they were trying to police my appearance and trying to use company policy to do so. My boss told me, was like, 'I have to say this to you, because it's quote unquote, company policy, but at the same time, I really don't care, you looked fine to me', but it threw me for a loop, because I'm still getting used to my body as a whole. I'm still accepting that 'what it looks like is what it looks like' stage. It's interesting that even when you're an adult, people are still trying to tell you what you can and cannot wear. So, it was very interesting.

So, it made me very mindful then, from now on, and I didn't wear them. I went and, actually that same day, grabbed a different pair of black jeans. I went out and bought different clothes, because it didn't make me as comfortable as how I was feeling. It made me not like the clothes I was wearing that day. It stopped me from doing what I wanted to do. So, even as an adult, it was crazy to me that there are still people, like, in middle school.

Was this both male and female coworkers?

Yeah, it was a group of male and female coworkers that had to talk about my body in a certain way. And it was very strange to me that this group of adults, much older than I am, found it okay to talk about my body and question my sexuality; question what I thought was okay, because they just were not comfortable. It wasn't even like I was exposing myself or anything like that, it's just my jeans shrunk. I couldn't control that. These are my only work jeans, my work pants, and I decided to wear a more form-fitting shirt. Not that it was see through or anything, it was just a little bit tighter. It wasn't even like it was skin-tight, it was just a little bit more form-fitting. I don't know why they felt like they needed to talk about it, but they got together and talked about it.

Have you felt pressured by the media in any way to change the way that you appear? Or present? And if so, like, would that be more general commercial media or like social media, anything like that?

I feel like social media and media as a whole. If you dress a certain way, you have to identify as part of the LGBTQ community. if you wear anything besides the typical male clothes, you have to be that, that's what you are, you know? And if you act feminine, you are a part of them, like you are a part of that community. It was kind of frustrating to me, growing up, like, why is that? Why do I have to be a part of that group? If I am a little bit feminine, why is it that the way I act and not who I'm interested in as a person, the way I act, defines where I am placed in social media? And I feel like social media as a whole makes me feel like I can't wear certain things because I will be identified with this group of people that I don't really want to identify as. That's not where I want to be.

Like, for instance, you wear a lot of black clothes, you then are lumped with a certain group of people, even if you don't necessarily share their ideals, share their perspective, share their, you know, anything, but simply because of the way you dress, you might be lumped in with them. And that's how it felt with me, because I liked wearing floral clothing, or painting or whatever, I'm lumped in with a group that I don't share any ideals with. Regardless, my thoughts and feelings don't matter, I'm just automatically lumped in.

I feel like social media has a way of creating cliques creating groups that you can't penetrate unless you present yourself in a certain way. Like, social media influencers. You can't be a social media influencer on a budget, you have to be seen flying all over the world, you have to be seen wearing the best of the best, with the best of cars, with the prettiest of people. You have to present yourself as a certain thing, and if you don't, you are not one, regardless of whether or not you have 1,000s of followers or whatnot, it doesn't matter.

I feel like social media has a way of creating hurdles for people. I feel like with me, social media had a way of - if I wanted to present myself a certain way, I had to dress a certain way. Having social media creates a persona, and you have to live up to that persona, and that persona has to fit in with how society views that persona. It creates this own subculture of its own self and, they're not always, but most of the time, they're not good. So, I do feel like social media, and media as a whole, has a big presence on people's everyday identity, because they feel like they add to how people idealize themselves and so they feel like they have to follow in these kinds of footsteps, and it's not healthy at all.

Yeah, it seems like that - and from a few of the other things you've talked about - it all kind of comes down to: if you don't neatly fit into this already established box, it's very hard to exist in a middle ground. It's very hard to exist not in an extreme or as a caricature of this stereotyped identity.

Yeah, it pretty much is like that. My extended family who are Trump supporters didn't fit the mold of racist, white supremacists who were for Trump. They didn't fit that, and so where are they? They're floating in this free space where if they said they're Trump supporters, people would treat them horribly, but they're Hispanic and so it's like their voice didn't matter, because they didn't fit a narrative.

My other side of the family, who are Black Lives Matter people, were very for the movement and out there protesting, but because they weren't black, their voice didn't necessarily matter all that much, because they didn't have that experience. So it's like, these people aren't extreme caricatures, like you said, of a certain group of people. They are kind of free-floaters. Like people who are LGBT, who identify as homosexual or gay, but they don't act 'gay'. Where are they? They have to be caricatures of their sexuality, because if they aren't, they're nothing. You know, like a lot of lesbian women who aren't - they don't want to act masculine, but want to act feminine. People treat them less-than because they're not wearing guy's clothes, you know? And they often face more stigma than the people who are, quote unquote, being caricatures of their sexuality.

So, I kind of, like you're saying with even racial relations, like, if you choose a side, and you know, life is not black and white. Racial tensions are not just black and white. It's more than that,

because there's even ethnic groups that hate other ethnic groups, but they are from the same place. You know, Syrians, and Palestinians, Egyptians and Syrians, you know, in Turkey, the different ethnic wars, genocide with each other, and in African countries. If you go from one part of the country to another, there's major tension. There's more than just Black and White, and across the board, between racial tensions, between political views, between etc.

Social media has a way of creating idealized characters of things, and if you don't fit in that mold, you don't have a place. I feel like a lot of people feel like they have to live up to that caricature, and if they don't, they're nowhere. It's like gangs, you have to fit into these gangs and do things that you yourself are not comfortable with. Because you want to feel a sense of belonging, you're willing to commit these atrocities, commit these things that aren't right, because you want a place to belong. I feel like that's where our world is, more so now than ever. I feel like this presidency has brought people to feel like they have to be an extreme, 'no, you have to be fully Black Lives Matter, you know, you have to be fully over here', or, 'no, if you're not over here, you're over there, and if you're not over there, you're over here'.

There's no middle ground, there's no room for compromise. Compromise is not a word in today's society. I feel like I'm compromised, but I feel like I'm in this space where my racial ties, my political ties, my religious ties, my identity ties are all because of social media, because of society pulling me in different directions. And we wonder why there's so much contention in the world right now. When people are being pulled in, 'what's going to trump what, what part of myself is going to trump the other?' and that's where I feel like a lot of unhappiness, and resentment, and rage comes from.

Not that there's not injustice in the world, because there's always been injustice, but rather people are unhappy with themselves because they're being pulled in 20,000 different directions. Which part of me is going to win? Is the color of my skin gonna win out? Is then my whole life going to be defined by my skin tone? Is how I'm fighting for my racial rights, fighting on the front lines for people of my skin color, is that going to be my life? Is it my religious ties? Am I going to denounce everything that my religion says to denounce and fully commit myself to that, and then everything else falls to the wayside? Why is it that I have to choose all these different things, when all of these different things make up who I am? So, that's kind of where I feel like I am and I feel like a lot of people are. But, it's hard to say that, because to say that means you are not an extreme and right now, the world wants extremes.

Now that we've talked about some difficult things, what makes you feel empowered, what makes you feel beautiful, or whatever adjective you most prefer?

What makes me feel myself is when I'm allowed to make my own decisions, make my own choices, and live with the consequences of them. And not have society try to dictate to me to make the right choice, when their choices haven't been great, either. You know, I'd rather not be hindered and be able to make my own decision, come what may, than have people tell me what to do. I'd rather go out and spend my money on a plushie and have the freedom to do so than feel like I have to do something else.

I think freedom of will is what allows me to feel most empowered. The freedom that I have to choose to follow my religion, what I believe in, over what society tells me. My religion is the freedom to choose what I want to wear, regardless of what my racial ties, political ties, tell me that I should be wearing. It's the freedom of choice, the freedom to choose what I want, and it goes far beyond anything else.

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

I feel like they've allowed me the freedom to breathe. Before, they used to be very judgy, and it was not out of a malicious place, but rather they wanted to protect me. They wanted what was best for me and, you know, people aren't always the best, so they wanted to protect me. The best way they knew how was to shelter me, in a sense, keep me muted. But now, because I don't feel comfortable in that way anymore, they've grown with me. If I feel comfortable doing something, they're not going to tell me, 'Don't do it'. They're gonna say, 'Hey, you know, these might be the consequences. But hey, you know, if you want to do it, we support you. We are there for you, regardless of what you do, regardless of your choices, regardless of what you decide for yourself'.

They've grown with me and they continuously grow with me. And if they know I'm not comfortable with something, they'll be like, 'Hey, then don't do it'. They give me the encouragement I need, so if it's something that I'm really uncomfortable with, there'll be like, 'Hey, you don't gotta do it. Just go home. If you don't want to be here, go home'. Or, if it's something that they know I need to work on and I want to work on, they'd be like, 'No, you need to say, No, you need to work this out. No, we need to work this out, and we'll be here with you, and we'll help you'. But, they're very considerate, as opposed to what they used to be. Now they're very much supportive.

So, do you feel like that came at a certain age? Or do you think that that came at a certain point in your life, like moving out or whatever that may be?

I think the moment when I started feeling like I had a voice and I was able to vocalize it, they then started to shift. I think what it was is that they realized that I wasn't speaking up for myself, I didn't know where I was. So, they took on this kind of, 'Well, if you're not going to take care of yourself, I will, we will, we will make the decisions for you, we will take that out of your hands, because we feel like you're not capable of doing so right now'. And you know, there's drawbacks and benefits to that. They took care of me when I didn't feel like I could take care of myself. They made the clothing decisions when I didn't know what I should be wearing, because I didn't want to be made fun of, but I didn't want to wear these ugly clothes. I didn't know, so they made those decisions for me for a while, until I kind of said enough was enough. I needed to know who I was.

It wasn't until I became comfortable with myself and started expressing it that they then took a step back and we're like, 'Okay, now you make the decisions, and we will support you, because now you know who you are'. So, it wasn't so much an age, but rather a mindset. I had to be willing to and strong enough to handle the decisions I made.

Have you had validation in the way that you present or appear from more casual acquaintances or business associates that's positively impacted you?

Yeah. When I started feeling more comfortable with myself, it showed, because I was more vocal, I was more engaging, I was less disinterested. My face changed, how I looked changed. Not just what I wore, but it was how I carried myself that really shifted and it made me noticeable, whereas in high school, I was non-existent, and people didn't even notice I was there.

Not to the people looking forward to seeing me, especially in business. People I was working with were excited when I came in, were gonna wait to work with me, wanted to work with me. Friends wanted to hang out with me, wanted me around, rather than my existence being there didn't really change a whole lot. So, people engaging with me and wanting me places really reinforces the fact that who I am matters, and this path that I'm taking of embracing myself, growing with myself, allowing myself to grow, as well like figuring out who I am, but allowing that person to grow; to change and shift. That positive reinforcement of people are enjoying the journey that I'm on, enjoying who I am currently, but excited to see who I become.

With people that I've worked with, with people in my family, it has been incredible, because it shows me that I do matter, that people actually care about me and about my well being and it makes me not want to disappoint them. Because, in a sense, I want to show them that I can grow, that I can be myself and grow with myself. So, I don't want to disappoint them. I feel like people would notice if I changed my hair, as opposed to before I would get the same thing all the time, because I didn't want people to notice. Now, I would shave my head if I want to. I will get weird haircuts if I want to, I will do as I please, and people are like, 'okay', they might be shocked, but they're like, 'okay, if that's what you want, that's fine'. So, it's that, I can do it, and those people will still be there, kind of thing that's great.

It seems like your relationship with yourself is really mirrored in the way that people interact with you. Your respect for your own autonomy ended up being others', respecting your autonomy, and your acceptance of yourself is reflected in others' accepting your choice.

Yeah, it's really that. We had a family get-together not too long ago, and I was really not feeling it. Like, I just wanted to be by myself. My family really wanted to see me, though. So I was like, you know, okay, so I went, grabbed some food, said hi to everybody, and then I went to my nieces and nephews, because they were the ones that really wanted me there. And, of course, I'm not gonna say no to that, because I don't know. But, they wanted to see me, so I went to them and I hung out with them. And I'm like, 'Listen, I kind of want to be home, is it alright? If I go home'? And they're like, 'yeah, that's fine'. And I was like, 'Okay', and I left. I might have been there only 10 minutes, but that freedom to not feel pressured to be there when I don't feel like I want to be there. My family, when I was leaving, they're like, 'Okay, we'll see you later'.

It was amazing, because a couple years ago, that would have been a huge no-no, it would have been a huge fight. I would have had to fight them to just go home. It would have been a guilt trip, 'Oh, you don't want to spend time with your family'. And now, they've gotten to the point where if I choose to not be there, then I don't got to be there, and they're okay with my choices. They're

okay with that, because they love me enough that if I'm choosing the fact that I don't feel comfortable, or don't want to be there, who are they to tell me that I need to be there when I don't feel like it? So, they've allowed me a certain amount of autonomy to do that, and it's great in that they respect that and what I feel. They respect me and it's great.

I feel like a lot of people would benefit from hearing this and maybe incorporating some of those changes into their own lives.

I hope so, especially with the whole extreme things. You know, you don't need to be an extreme. You can be yourself and make your own decisions, and you don't need to be this character, you know, this persona of yourself. I've seen it reflected in a lot of the people, I've expressed it and they're like, 'you know what, you're right. I don't have to feel like I need to be this. You know, I have, I have to live up to this expectation of myself'. And I hope that, you know, people help somebody else. Just a little bit.

I think diversity, even within subgroups, is one of the most beautiful things about humanity, but I think that there is pressure to make other people comfortable, like fitting into something that they can quickly categorize. Yeah, but that's not being true to yourself. Most of you, no, no, not at all.

Do you alter your natural appearance with things like tattoos, piercings, hair dye makeup, etc? And if so, why?

I do want to explore different avenues. I've explored a little bit with makeup and how it might look. I've allowed people to put makeup on me to see how it altered my appearance. I've tried different haircuts and different styles to see what fits me best. I'm not so sure about the piercings and tattoos, because I feel like who I am is constantly shifting, and I feel like getting things that are so permanent, in a sense, more so tattoos than piercings, piercings you can take out and you can change those around. There's tons of different kinds. But, I feel like with tattoos, they're so permanent that I can't say, for certain, that I will like this tattoo now and probably even the next day, I'll be like, 'Yeah, no, this isn't working for me'.

I do want to explore dyeing my hair, different colors, I do want to explore, you know, different avenues in that sense, altering my physical appearance, how that would feel towards my inner person, in a sense. And from my little experimentation of shaving my entire head, going bald, like monk-style bald, that little experimentation showed me that I had to do so. Like, I didn't have to feel so defined in my sense of style, but I can branch out and can do new things. It gave me a sense of freedom that I didn't expect. I just shaved all my hair off, like I could do this, I could do it, and no one can tell me not to. But, it didn't necessarily change who I am, and I think that was the really cool moment where I was like, 'I can do whatever I want on my body, and it won't change anything of how I feel on the inside, because who I am on the inside is not contingent on what I am on the outside'.

It was kind of this beautiful, kind of scary moment at the same time, where I could present myself outwardly as anything, but be a completely different person on the inside. And that could be true for anybody. So that's a scary thing, because someone can present themselves as something they're not entirely. And so it was kind of like this beautiful moment for me, but also this

awakening moment where it could go both ways. It was a moment where my eye was open to the universe, but I do think that it can function for different people as different things. And I could really tell about a person on how they present themselves or what they choose to adorn themselves with, but I do want to experiment more to see if that changes for me changes my perspective. You know, maybe dyeing my hair blonde might make me feel more like myself, you know, who knows?

Yeah, you know, things like that are maybe an area that I haven't explored yet, but I want to, and I'm excited that I have the freedom to do that, or not if I don't want to. So, you know, it goes back to my initial thing where the freedom of choice, the freedom to choose whether or not I want to is amazing. No Limits. Or, I can define what my limits are. If I have them, these are them and they could change if I want them to change.

Was there anything else that you want to share about your experience, or your identity or anything else that you would like to share with the painting of you?

Not really anything more than what I've already said, because I said a whole lot, but just the freedom to choose what you want to do with your life and follow should be your choice, not anybody else's. If you choose to live your life, your true self, by finding the partner you want to find, if you're a male and you're interested in males, don't let anybody stop you from making that choice. Unless you want to make that choice. You know, for me, I want to follow my religious pursuits, and no one should dictate to me how they should be because that's my personal thing. I want to follow my art career, because that's what I want to do. I want to wear a pink cardigan, I want to have plushie dogs, those are decisions I want to make. And the world shouldn't dictate to me how I want to live my life. No one should dictate to you how you want to live your life. You set your own limits. In essence, you choose what you live under what rules you live by, and don't let anybody tell you anything different, even this statement. If you want to completely disagree, do it. That's how I feel.