



Authentic Beauty Michaela Coel Isn't Waiting For Permission

BY JEANNINE AMBER · ESSENCE · APRIL 18, 2019

AS MICHAELA COEL BRINGS HER BOLD BEAUTY AND UNAPOLOGETIC TALENT TO ROLES IN TWO CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED NETFLIX SERIES, HER CONFIDENCE AND POWER SEEM UNSHAKABLE.

It's always interesting to ask a creative person where she feels most at home. With British actress Michaela Coel, the talent behind the sitcom *Chewing Gum* and, most recently, the series *Black Earth Rising* (both available on Netflix), the answer might surprise you.

Coel was born and raised in London and spent time in 2017 in her parents' native Ghana while filming *Black Earth Rising*, which explores the effects of the Rwandan genocide. Yet neither England nor the West African nation inspired a sense of belonging in Coel.

Instead, she found her people in Brooklyn in 2015. She had crossed an ocean to attend the Afropunk music festival. If you've never been, imagine a gathering of impossibly beautiful and expressively attired Black folks in all their natural hair, shaved head, tattooed and pierced glory. It's as if Erykah Badu, Solange Knowles and Zoë Kravitz had a party and invited all their friends.



AMERICAN APPAREL "COTTON SPANDEX DEEP CUT" BODYSUIT.DI\$COUNT UNIVER\$E PANTS.JENNIFER FISHER "BABY SAMIRA" EARRINGS.

“There was art everywhere,” Coel recalls. “And so many Black people. It was the first time I was ever in the majority. I felt accepted. I arrived with my weave, but after a few hours I was like, ‘I may not need this here.’ It was the most beautiful feeling, like I was being reborn.”

Coel’s appreciation of American Blackness began long before her first visit.

“Growing up, I watched Moesha, Girlfriends and Kenan & Kel,” she says. “I couldn’t find images of myself anywhere else. Black people weren’t in adverts or on billboards in England. We’re still not. America has a very different relationship to Blackness. There is love for what Black people look like.”

These days Coel, 31, wears her hair low, with no earrings and little makeup. She is striking in her natural beauty. On camera, she is equally bold as she depicts the extravagant awkwardness of Tracey Gordon, the inexperienced and sex-obsessed protagonist of Chewing Gum. Coel, who began her career as a Christian poet, wrote every episode of the raucous series herself, earning a BAFTA Award for her performance and high praise from critics, with Vanity Fair hailing the show as a “rare burst of joy.”

Warm and disarmingly candid in person, Coel speaks openly of a harrowing sexual assault she endured while filming the first season of Chewing Gum, and of the ugly racism she encountered as a child in London, where she was chased through the streets and called the N-word. When asked about viewers’ reaction to her work, she offhandedly offers yet another disturbing detail.



“Some people thought I was too ugly to be on TV,” she says. “There were people who said, ‘I couldn’t watch because of your face.’ These things hurt, and sometimes they can swallow all the positivity. I’m overjoyed when people connect with my work, but I’ve learned to not be too dependent on other people’s opinions.”

Coel’s self-protective stance may be rooted in pain, but it’s also allowed the star a measure of freedom. In 2018, for instance, she played a dating single mother in the British feature *Been So Long*.

“We’ve rarely had a romantic film with a dark-skinned Black woman as the lead,” she notes.

There were numerous discussions about how to fashion her character’s hair. Coel so vehemently objected to the implication that attractiveness and femininity could best be conveyed through a wig that—“as a rebellion”—she shaved off her hair.

“I didn’t wait for permission,” she says with a laugh. “I just did it.”

With that act of defiance, Coel immediately infused her character with confidence, style and sensuality. Perhaps she was remembering the spirit of Afropunk and the afternoon when she found a reflection of herself among sisters reveling in their authentic beauty. Coel had traveled thousands of miles from the place of her birth to bask in the welcome of home.