

# 12. RIPPLE BY EMILY STRONG

## **EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW:**

### **What is your racial identity?**

"I'm White, but I don't just identify as being White. There's a lot of things that make that up, like where certain family members come from, where I grew up, and stuff like that. I grew up in Pennsylvania. I have a lot of ancestors that were immigrants who came here from other countries, and then met once they were here. I grew up with Pennsylvania Dutch or German culture. So, a lot of the cultural aspects deal with that; growing up, those aspects of my family mean more.

Also, class. Middle class, upper middle class - my grandparents and ancestors being upper middle class, but some of them were on the poor side. I didn't necessarily grow up that way, but a lot of my family grew up like that and in the same area. So, my mom's side grew up closer to the Poconos. My dad's side grew up mainly in the downtown Allentown area. But, I think that is kind of what makes up that identity, or it's like, there's a lot more to it than just being, like, a White male, you know? Even though it doesn't sound like it.

I think once I started to grow up and think for myself, I started to question race, started to question hierarchy and class and really started to form an opinion of the outside world, whether it was accurate or not. I gravitated towards punk and counterculture at a relatively young age, especially because of skateboarding and music. There has always been a more accepting nature within counterculture - or at least the ability to question or relate to others.

Growing up, I didn't really think about how my race defines me - which is privilege for sure. I didn't think about where I went to school or why I was transferred out of my Elementary. I did realize that I was looked down upon once I was in middle school for some of the choices I made or some of the friends groups I chose to be around. Bad influence was always my enemy, but also made me feel better about myself, in some weird way."

## **FULL INTERVIEW:**

**Age** 34

**Assigned Sex** Male

**Pronouns** He/Him

**Gender Identity** Male

**Race** Caucasian

### **Could you describe your gender identity in more detail?**

I'm not sure what that means. I was given the identity of male at birth, but I always just look at myself as a human being. I haven't explored anything beyond what I've been assigned, but have always questioned the norms and look outside the lines.

## **What does femininity mean to you? And masculinity? How do you relate to those terms?**

It's hard, because you saying what it means to you is not the definition of what it is, right? I mean, I know what it means culturally, but I don't think that's necessarily correct, and that's where some of the questions get a little bit confusing - because, yeah, I can tell you what my definition of what femininity or masculinity is, but that doesn't mean that that's how I feel.

I mean, typically, femininity and masculinity are usually assigned to a certain gender, but that doesn't mean that you can't have those traits, or that you can't use different traits. Typically in society, feminine energy goes towards females, and masculinity is towards men, but I don't know if that's necessarily correct. I don't think that either are assigned to you, you feel how you feel.

I think that I might have had certain influences from certain figures in my life to be more masculine, but I definitely have a feminine side to myself. I mean, I was nurtured and brought up by mainly women, and I feel like there's an emotional element to that. I think there's definitely an influence from femininity. I've never really necessarily thought about it too much. I just think people make comments about people doing certain things or keeping up with their appearance or, you know, cutting your hair a certain way or doing your hair every day. Like, associating that with being feminine or not being masculine enough. I've always just done what I felt looked the best. I didn't really give a — if I was gonna get made fun of for it. I didn't really care. Like, okay, I use hairspray and I always make sure my hair looks a certain way for the most part, so at least it looks good to me. I don't really give a — if anybody else likes it. I mean, I do to an extent, but I would hope somebody would tell me that if it looks like —. But, that's also their opinion, so I guess it doesn't necessarily matter.

## **What is your racial identity?**

I'm White, but I don't just identify as being White. There's a lot of things that make that up, like where certain family members come from, where I grew up, and stuff like that. I grew up in Pennsylvania. I have a lot of ancestors that were immigrants who came here from other countries, and then met once they were here. I grew up with Pennsylvania Dutch or German culture. So, a lot of the cultural aspects deal with that; growing up, those aspects of my family mean more.

Also, class. Middle class, upper middle class - my grandparents and ancestors being upper middle class, but some of them were on the poor side. I didn't necessarily grow up that way, but a lot of my family grew up like that and in the same area. So, my mom's side grew up closer to the Poconos. My dad's side grew up mainly in the downtown Allentown area. But, I think that is kind of what makes up that identity, or it's like, there's a lot more to it than just being, like, a White male, you know? Even though it doesn't sound like it.

I think once I started to grow up and think for myself, I started to question race, started to question hierarchy and class and really started to form an opinion of the outside world, whether it was accurate or not. I gravitated towards punk and counterculture at a relatively young age, especially because of skateboarding and music. There has always been a more accepting nature within counterculture - or at least the ability to question or relate to others.

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

I think so. I feel like there have definitely been times in my life where I've gotten a pass because of what I am or who I am - that I'm a White, Caucasian, cis male. I've gotten in trouble with the law and I would have had a lot more sentencing if it wasn't for being that, for sure. Which is really sad to think about.

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

I mean, I feel like I've always been cut against the grain. I always tried to do what I wanted to do. I might have been influenced by others around me, but when it came to family and stuff like that, I did as much as I could to define myself by my own actions rather than by my family's interpretation of me. To find myself. I've always been that way.

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

I've never really felt pressured to change my appearance. I look the way that I do because I choose to look that way. If I get guff or whatever for it, it almost solidifies what I'm doing more so than making me want to change it just because somebody looked at me a certain way.

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

Absolutely, I almost feel like as I've gotten older, it's harder. Because, you know, everything with the internet. Social media and things like that. Things being judged constantly. We look at ourselves through microscopes all the time. We're always constantly judging what we do, and critiquing what we do, and nothing's ever good enough for anyone - especially ourselves.

**So the next question was about feeling pressured by the media to change your appearance. You kind of covered that a bit, but what aspects of the media have impacted your self-perception the most? Would that be commercial, social, mainstream, or other?**

I mean, I guess other artists and musicians and things like that.

**Is that more in terms of what they're doing? Or what they look like?**

What they look like. I've always looked up to musicians and artists. Outsider figures, but also, yeah, they could be considered public figures. But, they're not like your normal public figures. People who just kind of do things their own way. It's weird to think about now, because your perception of a lot of these people change when you realize they are not who they were trying to be, or who they were wasn't actually someone you should try to be. Almost like the main appeal was the fact that they might have been looked at as an outsider or the underdog.

I feel like I've always had a certain kind of look or appearance. I mean, some things change a little bit, but for the most part, I've looked like 30 different versions of myself. Like, the same thing, just over and over again. To me, I don't really feel like I've changed that much. I've just gotten older... maybe, in some ways wiser, but not always. But, I don't know. I think that some commercial aspects have dictated the way that I look with what I'm doing. I mean, mainstream media and culture have affected me in some ways, but just not like how you would normally think.

### **Do you do anything to alter your natural appearance, such as tattoos, piercings, hair dye, makeup, etc? And if so, why?**

Yes. I've dyed my hair since I was 13 or 14. I've been dyeing it consistently since then. I have tattoos all over my body, mostly on my arms. I have some piercings; I just have my ears pierced, but I did have my nose pierced for 15 years. I feel like, tattoo-wise, things just started out as memories, or certain timestamps of where you were at a certain point, or a certain place you were at. I travel a lot, so a lot of it has to do with that: where I am, where I'm at in my life.

Some of it had to do with alternative culture and growing up in the late 90s, and things being a little bit more culturally accepted. And again, I feel like late 90s - early 2000s, there was the cliché of your piercings and stuff like that, but I just never really cared. I liked how it looked. I just did it, and I never really got much backlash from it. I mean, tattoos a bit, for sure.

I feel like now I'm just so used to people looking at me a certain way. I don't even think about it, I just go about my life... and it's also a little bit more culturally accepted now to look the way that I do. I feel like I got more compliments in the last, like, three to five years than I did for the last 15 years. I was a little bit more radical 15-20 years ago, but like I said, I've just been kind of regurgitating versions of myself.

### **What makes you feel beautiful or handsome and what makes you feel empowered?**

I feel like, ultimately, I never really feel beautiful or handsome. I feel like it's empowering having other people come up and tell you things like that, but at the same time I don't know if I ever actually feel that way. It's gotten to a certain point where I'm alright... At least I don't completely dissect how I look.

Getting ready to leave the house, I definitely don't have a normal ritual, whatever normal really means.. I'm not like a normal male that just is like, 'Alright, I just walked out in the shower, I might use my electric razor and spray myself down with Axe body spray'.

I mean, I always feel so much better after I shave. No matter what, shaving has consistently been one of my rituals for the last 10 years. I used to show up at places when I would play shows, and the first thing I would do once we were showed where to put our stuff was go to the sink, wash my hair, and shave, and that made me feel better about myself. And if I didn't feel good about myself, at least it gave me a little bit of like, some sort of freshness, or a restart.

### **Have your family and close friends been supportive of your appearance and your self perception?**

I mean, growing up it was hard. I feel like I grew up with kind of open-minded parents, but other family members and stuff... You know, I grew up in rural Pennsylvania. Like, my family hunts and stuff like that. So, the way I look; wearing skin-tight, black clothing, and dyed hair and stuff. I mean, it's not really that well-accepted. I feel like now, they just accept me for who I am and they're like, 'Oh, that's —. That's just the way he is'.

But, I feel like growing up, it was a huge backlash. My mom didn't want me to dye my hair. I feel like once I started that, I never stopped. I used to dye my hair way more often when I was 14, 15, 16. Once I started, every couple weeks it was a different color and it wasn't really accepted. Once I graduated high school, my mom had to plead with me just to dye my hair all black, just for graduation pictures.

### **As opposed to unnatural colors.**

Right, haha.

### **Has there been any supportiveness from friends and family?**

Yeah, after a certain amount of time, like with friends and things like that, you create your own community that are the same type of outsiders as you. As I've gotten older, it's just gotten bigger and more people become friends with me, become part of my inner circle. It's more accepting of other people like you, or outsiders.

My family kind of looks past a lot of my decisions of how I look, just because they know me as a person, but they're definitely judging other people who look like that. So, that's partially in the back of my head, always. I didn't turn out the way that, I guess, my family never thought that I was going to. If it was looked at as feminine or masculine or whatever, I never really had an identity that way. Maybe when I was in my early teens, I thought maybe things would be looked at a little bit like that, but I feel like since I'm older I'm just like - I use hairspray and I do stuff that most men wouldn't think are masculine, but I just don't really give a —. And it's not like the 80s where it's like, 'I'm in a hair metal band, and I'm just trying to get chicks'. I've never been like that, ever. I've always looked at it as: this is what I, stylistically, think looks good. It looks good for myself, and so that's what I've done.

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

Like I said, the last couple of years, I go out and I get compliments from people all the time. I feel like it's a little bit more culturally acceptable now to look alternative. As far as people that I don't know, I've definitely had people compliment me more - at least in the last three, four, or five years. When I was younger, not so much. I definitely got made fun of a lot when I was in my early teens, 20s. But now, I feel like I'm a little bit more comfortable in my skin, and I guess I don't really care if people do. I mean, I didn't really care then, but I don't really look for it now. People might be making fun of me, but I'm not searching for that. I'm not out looking to see if people might not like me. I feel like I do notice when people compliment me, because it stands out. People saying they like your hair, or how you look; it can be empowering.

With friends and family... I feel like it's kind of an unsaid thing between friends. I mean, we all compliment each other and stuff, but I feel like a lot of my friends look so similar... like, if someone's wearing a certain thing, sure, but I feel like it's overall kind of an unspoken thing.

**Is there anything else you want to add? Anything that you want people to think about when they're looking at the painting of you?**

Ultimately, there are a lot of layers to what make up a human and what makes up someone's identity, or what they identify as who they are. That might not even be a small facet of anything about their lives, like what they might look like on the outside might be completely different than what they feel or what they're doing on the inside.