

**FROM REDHEAD TO GINGER: OTHERING WHITENESS IN NEW MEDIA**

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# **FROM REDHEAD TO GINGER: OTHERING WHITENESS IN NEW MEDIA**

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University of Pittsburgh, 2018

This dissertation examines the recent (2005 - present) development of the ginger internet meme, people's experiences with so-called "gingerism," and the cultural environments that have fostered these sentiments. With incidents like Kick a Ginger Day, the phenomenon walks the line between being satire and not. Jokes about gingers needing extra sunscreen or having no souls circulate alongside both tragic news, like a series of redheaded teen suicides due to extreme bullying, and seemingly bizarre occurrences, such as the banning of redheaded men's sperm from an international cryogenics bank. However, the aim of my project is not to insist that redheaded people are subjected to discrimination, nor to compare gingerism to the oppression of any marginalized group. Rather, incidents like those above lead me to ask: how has "the ginger" been created and spread through new media, and what can it tell us about current and changing conceptions of whiteness in our culture? Using online discourse analysis, oral history interviewing, and archival research, I argue that against a backdrop of shifting racial and ethnic demographics in the Anglo-American world, the ginger meme exposes the contingencies, limits, and constructed nature of whiteness. The ginger figure acts as a scapegoat for anxieties about white heteronormativity. The qualities ascribed to the ginger, namely, weakness, nerdiness, and disgustingness, are those same qualities some white men fear they represent, but with which they do not want to be associated. As such, these qualities are projected onto the ginger's representation of "excessive whiteness" and thus safely distanced from "normative whiteness." The ginger phenomenon also reflects sentiments towards white women, who are either

dichotomized into the same ginger stereotypes as men or hypersexually fetishized. Because whiteness's power comes from its unquestioned authority as "normal," the ginger phenomenon could potentially undermine it; yet the ginger phenomenon is also polysemous and thus interpreted in myriad ways. The ginger phenomenon results from the memetic and racio-visual logics of the new media environment during the transition from a "colorblind" view of race to an increasingly anxious perception of whiteness as under attack.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Demographic trends show that the Anglo-American world is shifting away from a white majority. In particular, in the US and England, experts predict that by approximately 2044 and 2070, respectively, white people will no longer be a majority racial group. Some experts insist that despite these new trends, the world might not actually look very different from how it is now, because these changes have already been happening slowly.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, such predictions have been sensationalized through alarmist headlines in online news such as, “White Nationalists are Right: America is Becoming Less White.”<sup>2</sup> In reaction to these predictions, there has been a growing contingent of racism, xenophobia, and white supremacy, especially white masculinist supremacy. These ideologies undergird recent Anglo-American cultural events such as Brexit, the election of President Donald Trump, and the mainstreaming of white “nationalist” groups. Feelings of threatened and subordinated whiteness, especially when connected to masculinity, have become explicitly dangerous.

One place in which these feelings of subordinated white masculinity have existed for a long time is the internet. Anxieties about whiteness manifest online in various forms. For example, on certain parts of social media platforms like 4chan and reddit, people have anonymous and pseudoanonymous conversations steeped in racism and misogyny. These sites are stereotyped as places where nerds (typically white men) spend their time. Admittedly, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Alba, “The Myth of a White Minority,” *New York Times*, June 11, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/11/opinion/the-myth-of-a-white-minority.html>; “White Britons ‘Will be Minority’ Before 2070, Says Professor,” *Independent*, May 2, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/white-britons-will-be-minority-before-2070-says-professor-8600262.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Cristina Silva, “White Nationalists Are Right: America Is Becoming Less White,” *Newsweek*, August 16, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/white-nationalists-are-right-america-becoming-less-white-651541>.

impossible to tell who actually participates on these sites because of their (pseudo)anonymous design. However, as Whitney Phillips has argued, regardless of the “true” gender, racial, and class identities of participants, the behaviors on these sites, which she classifies as subcultural trolling, “are gendered male, are raced white, and are dependent upon a certain degree of economic privilege.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, no matter who creates them, these discourses reflect aspects of privileged white masculinity. A, if not the major cultural product resulting from these discourses is internet memes. Colloquially, internet users often describe image macros (pictures with overlaid texts) as memes. However, in this dissertation, I understand memes from Limor Shifman’s perspective:

*a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.”*<sup>4</sup>

In other words, memes are not just funny images, but much larger “socially constructed public discourses.”<sup>5</sup> Memes have always been a part of human cultures, but they take on specific forms in the new media environment. Phillips suggests that subcultural trolls were responsible for the creation (or at least amplification) of nearly every popular internet meme from 2003-2011.<sup>6</sup>

In line with stereotypes about sites like reddit and 4chan, the popular cultural image of a troll is again a nerdy white male.<sup>7</sup> Perceptions of white nerd masculinity are important to study because they represent a group of people who do not meet the dominant norms of masculinity,

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<sup>3</sup> Whitney Phillips, *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015) 42.

<sup>4</sup> Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Phillips, *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> John R. Suler and Wende L. Phillips, “The Bad Boys of Cyberspace: Deviant Behavior in a Multimedia Chat Community,” *CyberPsychology and Behavior* 1 (1998): 275.

and therefore feel subordinated in some way. However, their anger over being subordinated is often directed towards minorities, feminists, and people concerned with social justice, rather than towards systems of patriarchy. Many of the most recognizable characters that have been created through memes and trolling discourses are racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist, and/or classist representations. However, there is one popular meme from the past decade that centers, perhaps surprisingly, on a white male figure. The “ginger,” or person (most often male) with red hair, light skin, and freckles, is a nerdy, despicable figure, positioned socially beneath that even of the internet obsessed troll. If nerds are the punching bag for dominant white masculinity, the ginger fulfills the same role for white men who feel they are already excluded from white male privilege. That category appears to be growing, as white supremacists march under the guise of protecting their “persecuted” culture.

In this project, I argue that against a backdrop of shifting racial and ethnic demographics in the Anglo-American World, the ginger meme exposes the contingencies, limits, and constructed nature of whiteness. The ginger figure acts as a scapegoat for anxieties about white heteronormativity. The qualities ascribed to the ginger, namely, weakness, nerdiness, and disgustingness, are those same qualities some white men fear they represent, but with which they do not want to be associated. As such, these qualities are projected onto the ginger’s representation of “excessive whiteness” and thus safely distanced from “normative whiteness.” The ginger phenomenon also reflects sentiments towards white women, who are either dichotomized into the same ginger stereotypes as men or hypersexually fetishized. The ginger phenomenon makes whiteness strange, revealing both its particularity and limitedness.<sup>8</sup> Because whiteness’s power comes from its unquestioned authority as “normal,” the ginger phenomenon

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 4.

could potentially undermine it; yet the ginger phenomenon is also polysemous and thus interpreted in myriad ways.<sup>9</sup> The ginger phenomenon results from the memetic and racio-visual logics of the new media environment during the transition from a “colorblind” view of race to an increasingly “hysterical” perception of whiteness as under attack.<sup>10</sup>

## 1.1 BRINGING TOGETHER STUDIES OF WHITENESS AND NEW MEDIA

I situate this dissertation at the intersection of critical whiteness studies and humanistic analyses of the internet. Early optimism about the internet led to the belief that it would be a “colorblind” space, in which race would no longer be a social issue; some people believed that a detachment from physical bodies would facilitate this.<sup>11</sup> A “colorblind” view of race develops from people insisting they do not “see” race or color in others.<sup>12</sup> Rather than undermining racial categories, however, colorblind ideologies insure white dominance, creating a “racism without racists.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, colorblind racism is the result of white people perceiving themselves as non-racist, without addressing any structural inequalities. Colorblind racism is part of the larger trend of viewing Western cultures as post-racial. Post-racial rhetoric is a political strategy designed to

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<sup>9</sup> Dyer, *White*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 202; Ryan Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 23; Linda Martín Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York, Routledge, 2002), 87.

<sup>12</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, “Color-Blind Racism,” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2007), 131; Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 132.

<sup>13</sup> Leslie G. Carr, “Colorblind” Racism (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1997), x; Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 1.

frame racism as a problem of the past and assert that modern society no longer needs to pay attention to matters of race.<sup>14</sup> Of course, this is problematic because post-racial discourses erase power structures, flatten social difference, and ignore the continuing material effects of racism.<sup>15</sup>

Overly optimistic sentiments about the internet and race are no longer supported amongst academics, but rhetorics of post-racism and colorblindness are still common within popular culture, especially in media.<sup>16</sup> Several scholars have therefore cited the need for further analyses of race in new media that explicitly interrogate whiteness. In 2007, following Richard Dyer, Lisa Nakamura argued that, “the paradox of whiteness is the very paradox of new media.”<sup>17</sup> Whiteness must balance being all powerful with also being invisible and unidentifiably normal; within the online environment this has in some ways become easier to do. Thus, Nakamura calls specifically for studies of whiteness in cyberspace, in addition to studies of race and ethnicity online, more generally.<sup>18</sup> In 2012, Jessie Daniels likewise called for researchers to interrogate whiteness online.<sup>19</sup> Studying race online only through overt acts of racism misses the less obvious yet insidious ways that whiteness reproduces itself in this environment.<sup>20</sup> Without explicitly questioning how whiteness works in the online space, Daniels argues, internet studies will be left “entranced by the spectacle of the Other, denying racism, and unable to see its own whiteness.”<sup>21</sup> Following Thomas Nakayama, I note that within the new media environment, there

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<sup>14</sup> Kent Ono, “Postracism: A Theory of the ‘Post’- as Political Strategy,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 34, no. 3 (2009): 227-8.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>16</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 1; Catherine R. Squires, *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century* (New York University Press, 2014), 6.

<sup>17</sup> Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 99.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Jessie Daniels, “Race and Racism in Internet Studies: A Review and Critique,” *New Media & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 711.

<sup>20</sup> Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 106.

<sup>21</sup> Daniels, “Race and Racism in Internet Studies,” 711.

have been noticeable shifts in discourses about whiteness; in these shifts, whiteness repositions itself to remain dominant.<sup>22</sup> Nakayama warns that scholars must look out for new ways that whiteness will reconfigure itself online.<sup>23</sup> In this vein, I seek to analyze the ginger phenomenon as a concrete example of a reconfiguration of whiteness in the new media environment.

Since 1995, the internet has been a visually privileged space;<sup>24</sup> the ubiquity of visual content today has been enabled by technological advancement.<sup>25</sup> The rise in visual-centered online experiences has also aligned with the growth of a colorblind racial politics, leading to what Nakamura calls “digital race formation.”

The Internet is a visual technology, a protocol that is interfaced for seeing and networked in ways that produce a particular set of *racial formations*. These formations arose in a specific historical period: the premillennial neoliberal moment, when race was disappeared from public and governmental discourse while at the same time policies regarding Internet infrastructures and access were being formed.<sup>26</sup>

The result of these interactions is what Nakamura refers to as the internet’s racio-visual logic. Within the internet’s racio-visual logic today, “anyone who can take a picture can upload a file and can create visual images of race or commentaries on its visualization that stand in defiance of a neoliberal stance that tries to disappear race.”<sup>27</sup> However, the consequences of doing this are not necessarily positive or progressive. As Nakamura explains, the racio-visual logic of the internet is full of contradictions and paradoxes—and the ginger phenomenon points to several of them. The ginger phenomenon has been created in part by highly constructed visual images of a

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Nakayama, “What’s Next for Whiteness and the Internet,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 1 (2017): 69.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Tim Highfield and Tama Leaver, “Instagrammatics and Digital Methods: Studying Visual Social Media, from Selfies and GIFs to Memes and Emoji,” *Communication Research and Practice* 2, no. 1 (2016): 49.

<sup>26</sup> Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 202.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.



particular kind of whiteness. In this way, it can draw attention to the constructed nature of whiteness, which could potentially undermine it, in line with Nakamura's claim. However, as I will explain in this dissertation, due to the polysemy of the ginger phenomenon and its creation within post-racial and color-blind attitudes towards race, this does not always happen.

The racio-visual logic of the internet also works alongside what Ryan Milner terms the logic of memetics in new media. Milner points to five qualities of the current media environment that he defines as part of this logic. They are: multimodality (memes are found across various modes of communication such as text, image, hyperlinking, etc.), reappropriation (memes are often created through combination of the old and new, through bricolage and poaching) resonance (memes have meanings with which new media users connect, inspiring further iterations) collectivism (memes are a fundamental part of participatory web culture), and spread (memes circulate pervasively).<sup>28</sup> Limor Shifman likewise suggests that the current online environment is hypermemetic, or an environment in which memes both spread extremely quickly, and have become a new vernacular that transcends on and offline spaces.<sup>29</sup> These qualities have led to memes' status as a "lingua franca for digitally mediated participation, a common tongue allowing geographically dispersed participants to connect and share."<sup>30</sup> Visually racialized images are a major part of this lingua franca.

Much like memes themselves, the idea of "gingers" is not new and did not originate with the internet. The term "ginger" has been used in England for centuries and red-haired people have almost always been viewed as different in ways that vary from slightly fitting outside of the norm of beauty standards, to representing the devil. However, in the context of media

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<sup>28</sup> Milner, *The World Made Meme*, 23-38.

<sup>29</sup> Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Milner, *The World Made Meme*, 7.

convergence and participatory culture, the ginger has taken on a specific form. Media convergence describes a media environment in which there is flow across platforms, cooperation between industries, and audiences who will “go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.”<sup>31</sup> Participatory culture describes the changing relationship between media producers and consumers. These two groups are now blurred and interact in increasingly creative ways.<sup>32</sup> Convergence and participation are not technologically determined by the internet. Rather, they represent a cultural shift in which consumers are encouraged to seek out and make connections between content across media types.<sup>33</sup> There are at least four aspects of the ginger phenomenon that have been aided by shifts towards media convergence and participatory culture. First, through repetition across all forms of social media, ginger stereotypes have crystallized into a recognizable figure. The ginger was always Other in some sense. However, he or she was not always a soulless, de-gendered, nerdy creep, in the way he or she is depicted today. Secondly, finding, selecting, and manipulating images is easily accomplished with search and digital editing tools. Once they are uploaded and shared, ginger image macros have become part of a larger visual aesthetic that Nick Douglas terms, “internet ugly.”<sup>34</sup> Thirdly, the meme can spread faster than ever before, both from person to person and across media forms, due to the internet’s networked connections.<sup>35</sup> Finally, these prejudicial ideas have flowed across previously less porous national and cultural borders from English into American, Australian, and Canadian cultures, as well, thanks to international platforms, like ginger pride Facebook groups,

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<sup>31</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Nick Douglas, “It’s Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 315.

<sup>35</sup> Milner, *The World Made Meme*, 224.

and the ability to quickly share news sources via links. Even more recently, instances of “gingerism” have been identified in Eastern Europe, France, and Germany, suggesting the ginger meme is recognized there, too. The global reach of the ginger phenomenon also speaks to the internet’s memetic logic.

The ginger has been constructed as different through multiple avenues that convene in online media. Namely, discourses of gender, science, and race are all part of the larger ginger meme, which positions the ginger outside of various social norms. The ginger phenomenon offers a unique case study into the process of Othering. Othering is the:

simultaneous construction of the self or in-group and the other or out-group in mutual and unequal opposition through identification of some desirable characteristic that the self/in-group has and the other/out-group lacks and/or some undesirable characteristic that the other/out-group has and the self/in-group lacks. Othering thus sets up a superior self/in-group in contrast to an inferior other/out-group, but this superiority/inferiority is nearly always left implicit.<sup>36</sup>

Theories of the Other have been used to describe many facets of social identity, particularly gender and race.<sup>37</sup> The ginger phenomenon is exceptional in that it is a group of white people, often men, who are Othered, and not on the basis of another recognizable intersecting oppressive identity characteristic, such as class or sexuality. However, the ginger is not, as some scholars have suggested, merely an “uncomplicated signifier” that serves as an “arbitrary” physical difference in an allegory about racialization, generally.<sup>38</sup> Rather, the ginger’s stereotypical qualities reflect particular cultural anxieties about whiteness. As Whitney Phillips argues in her

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<sup>36</sup> Lajos Brons, “Othering, an Analysis,” *Transcience* 6, no. 1 (2015): 70.

<sup>37</sup> See for example: Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1949); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>38</sup> Brian Creech, “Refugee Status: Tracing the Global Flows of M.I.A.,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 7, no. 3 (2014): 277-80; Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeus Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: NC, Duke University Press, 2014), 67-71.

work on trolling, we must pay attention to the aspects of our culture that seem abnormal, in order to question why certain other aspects seem normal.<sup>39</sup> The ginger phenomenon has received an enormous amount of sensationalist media attention due to people's difficulty reconciling prejudice towards a group of white people, especially when that prejudice, on the surface, seems to mirror racialization. Of course, given the historical instability of the category of whiteness, this should not be that surprising.<sup>40</sup> However, it is also especially concerning within today's cultural environment, where such attention could reflect a desire to see whiteness as an identity which has become marginal and victimized, in line with current white "nationalist" ideologies.

This dissertation examines the recent (2005 - present) development of the ginger internet meme, people's perceived and lived experiences with so-called "gingerism," and the cultural environments that have fostered these sentiments. With incidents like Kick a Ginger Day, the phenomenon walks the line between being satire and not. Jokes about gingers needing extra sunscreen or having no souls circulate alongside both tragic news, like a series of redheaded teen suicides due to extreme bullying, and seemingly bizarre occurrences, such as the banning of redheaded men's sperm from an international cryogenics bank. However, the aim of my project is not to insist that redheaded people are subjected to discrimination, or to compare gingerism to the oppression of any marginalized group. Rather, incidents like those above lead me to ask: how has "the ginger" been created and spread through new media, and what can it tell us about current and changing conceptions of whiteness in our culture?

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<sup>39</sup> Phillips, *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, 7.

<sup>40</sup> Many scholars have detailed this history. In this dissertation, I particularly draw from: Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997); Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: WW Norton, 2010); Linda Martín Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015).

In our current sociopolitical climate, it is increasingly important to understand the lengths to which people will go to protect and police whiteness. Increasingly visible racist movements have successfully used the power of new media and the memetic logics of internet communication to spread their messages. Therefore, interrogating how particular forms of whiteness are both rejected and protected through the online ginger phenomenon is especially crucial in today's cultural context.

## 1.2 METHODOLOGIES

To analyze the ginger phenomenon, I used three primary research methodologies: online discourse analysis, oral history interviewing, and archival research. Because the ginger phenomenon developed and primarily circulates online, the majority of the texts I analyze in this dissertation come from the internet. Additionally, to assay the effects of online discourses and give voice to the “real world” implications of this phenomenon, I completed oral history interviews with thirty-five individuals. Finally, I also included archival research, most often to provide historical context and comparisons for the phenomenon, and to include relevant texts not available through the internet. I collected and analyzed each of my data sources from a grounded theory approach, meaning that I started with the data and developed conceptual categories through comparative analysis.<sup>41</sup> I continued simultaneously collecting and analyzing new sources until I reached saturation of themes.<sup>42</sup> However, I also want to note that the ginger phenomenon is ongoing, as I will point to in the conclusion, and as such, in the future, new themes may

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<sup>41</sup> Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 2012), 23.

<sup>42</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (London: SAGE, 2006), 6.

develop. I used NVivo Qualitative research software to store my data and to code for themes both within each data type and across them.

### **1.2.1 Online discourse analysis**

Over the past six years, I have built an archive of over 600 ginger texts. These include online news stories, image macros, comment threads, viral videos, blog posts, and other internet manifestations of the phenomenon, as well as some historical examples. The attached appendix shows the distribution of these texts (see Appendix C). The approximately 189 texts that I feature here as examples in this dissertation have been selected from that archive in order to highlight both major themes from the phenomenon and to identify the array of platforms across which the ginger meme spreads. I analyze these texts through online discourse analysis. Online discourse analysis builds upon the work of critical discourse analysts such as Tuen A. van Dijk and Norman Fairclough. Therefore, the emphasis of online discourse analysis is a focus on the connections between language, power, and ideology.<sup>43</sup> A new media discourse analysis must also consider technology, platform, and multimodality.<sup>44</sup> In this project, I also consider visual texts a central part of online discourse. Therefore, I have included an appendix for the reader that features the images I discuss (see Appendix D – separate).

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<sup>43</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2013); Tuen A. van Dijk, “Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis,” *Discourse & Society* 4, no. 2 (1993): 249-283.

<sup>44</sup> Crispin Thurlow and Kristine Mroczek, “Introduction: Fresh Perspectives on New Media Sociolinguistics,” in *Digital Discourse: Language in New Media*, ed. Crispin Thurlow and Kristine Mroczek (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), xix.

Performing qualitative research in the ever-shifting and converging online environment is difficult and traditional methodologies do not map easily onto the online sphere.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, it is increasingly challenging for researchers to create prescriptive “steps” for online research and to expect other scholars to be able to use them in equally valuable ways. However, the most important aspects of the process are the careful selection of texts and analysis that is socially, culturally, and historically situated. Because of the proliferation and messiness of new media texts, Naomi Baron argues that analysts of online discourse must make use of creativity in their approaches to studying this ever-changing terrain.<sup>46</sup> Within social science disciplines, online discourse analyses are often done via specific platforms in order to facilitate data aggregation. However, following Baron’s lead, from a humanities perspective, I seek to show the proliferation of the ginger phenomenon into all aspects of popular internet culture. Therefore I analyze texts in the forms of: Internet news articles and their comments, blogs and their comments, message boards, news broadcasts, memes, viral videos, listicles, GIFS, marketing and advertising materials, and stock images. Each of these media have their own capabilities, affordances, and outcomes, in addition to limitations, that I will describe throughout the analysis.<sup>47</sup>

While it is important for my project to consider multiple platforms in order to get at the ways in which this phenomenon is incredibly far-reaching, this type of research also raises the problem of innumerable texts. There are thousands of textual examples of the ginger phenomenon and I could not analyze all of them. Making decisions about where and when to

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<sup>45</sup> Nancy K. Baym and Annette N. Markham, “Introduction: Making Smart Choices on Shifting Ground,” in *Internet Inquiry: Conversations about Method*, ed. Annette N. Markham and Nancy K. Baym (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009), xii.

<sup>46</sup> Naomi Baron, “Foreward,” in *Digital Discourse: Language in New Media* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), xi-xvi.

<sup>47</sup> Sandra Evans, Katy Pearce, Jessica Vitak, and Jeffrey Treem, “Explicating Affordances: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Affordances in Communication Research,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 22, no. 1 (2017): 36.

stop and start the collection of online texts leads to questions about comprehensiveness and generalizability for internet projects that deal with large amounts of data. However, qualitative online discourse analysis is useful insofar as it helps us explore specific cultural moments and contexts about which meanings are created through language; it is not meant to represent the entire internet.<sup>48</sup> The goal of qualitative online research is not generalizability or comprehensiveness, but rather the creation of rich comparisons and the creation of research that can be coordinated with other findings.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, as described above, I did not aim to analyze all possible texts, but followed a grounded theory approach and stopped when I reached a saturation of themes. Additionally, as I have found in my research, there is a significant amount of online content with which very few people engage. Therefore, I have focused on texts that have circulated as important in redheaded online groups and those that have garnered attention in the wider mainstream online media. Whenever there are multiple examples I could have presented, I will explain the rationale behind why I selected those that I did, and analyze them with respect to their social, cultural, and historical context.

### **1.2.2 Oral history interviewing**

Oral history interviewing is a form of qualitative research that involves in-depth interviewing of personal testimonies, the recordings of which have additional purposes after the interviewing is

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<sup>48</sup> Norman K. Denzin, "Cybertalk and the Method of Instances," in *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*, ed. Steve Jones (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1999), 122.

<sup>49</sup> Nancy Baym, "What Constitutes Quality in Qualitative Internet Research?," in *Internet Inquiry*, 175.



completed.<sup>50</sup> Oral history offers researchers the opportunity to study individuals' lives through their own reflections on their personal experiences, often giving voice to groups that have been historically marginalized.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, oral history projects can shed light on areas of our social world not typically studied, such as everyday, ordinary lived experiences.<sup>52</sup> One of the most important aspects of many oral history projects is their commitment to social justice and decolonizing the research process. Because oral history is concerned with the process of co-creation between interviewer/interviewee, rather than domination/objectification of interviewee by interviewer, oral historians refer to interviewees as "narrators."<sup>53</sup> Oral history also makes available information about historical events from which there are no archived records or lasting documents, and identifies uses of symbols and meaning making in the recalling of memories.<sup>54</sup> Conducting oral histories has allowed me to better understand the many ways in which the ginger phenomenon has had effects on individuals' lives, experiences, and identities. Because it is often viewed through a "joking" lens or as a sensationalist issue, mass media coverage tends to ignore the voices of people affected by gingerism, except in unusual or extreme cases, such as Kick a Ginger Day. People with red hair themselves, especially those who are invested in attending red hair events and joining red hair groups, have much more in-depth and nuanced perceptions about how they understand being bullied due to their appearance, how their appearance intersects with their familial, national, racial and ethnic identities, and how these physical traits are represented in media. The flexibility of the oral history interviewing format allowed my narrators to spend time recalling stories and experiences related to their hair color

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<sup>50</sup> Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 4.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

that were most memorable to them, resulting in rich data. I completed oral history interviews with a total of thirty-five people.

Most of my oral history interviews were completed during two research trips. The first was to the Irish Redhead Convention, held in August 2015 in Crosshaven, a sailing village in County Cork, Ireland. The event was intended primarily as a gathering of redheads with entertainment, food, merchandise vendors, games, and competitions, such as “most freckles per square inch” and “longest red hair.” The event also a fundraiser for the Irish Cancer Society. At the event, I interviewed four people, including the creator of a red hair-themed web series, and attended a large, town hall style discussion with about forty redheaded individuals. I also traveled to the UK on this trip, where I interviewed three additional people, including the owner of a “ginger pride” shop and the creator of anti-bullying campaign. This trip was funded by the Nationality Rooms Scholarship program at the University of Pittsburgh. The second major research trip I took was to the Redhead Event in May 2016, held in Portland, OR, at the Oregon Health and Sciences University. The Redhead Event was both as an attempt to break the Guinness Book of World Records record for most natural redheads in one place, and a recruitment event for DNA samples for melanoma research. I completed interviews with twenty-two people at this event. The Redhead Event was more formalized than the Irish Redhead Convention. I had the assistance of the event’s staff in advertising my project ahead of time and setting up a table at which prospective narrators could easily find me. These factors are the reason for the much higher number of interviews at the second event. This trip was funded by the Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies Program and the Cultural Studies Program at the University of Pittsburgh. The remaining six interviews were done with people with whom I made contact online, or via word of mouth references.

These oral history interviews are not representative of the experiences of every person with red hair, nor are they intended to be. In contrast, oral history interviewing seeks to provide rich descriptions of experiences, with variety in their details.<sup>55</sup> The majority of my interviews were done during red hair-centered events. Therefore, it is likely that the people who attended, and thus who I interviewed, were more invested in their hair color and associated traits as important aspects of their identities than others may be. Furthermore, because I did the highest number of my interviews at the Redhead Event in Portland, OR, the geographical distribution of interviewees is focused on the West Coast of the US. Though this skews the data in some respects, it was also interesting because multiple narrators had experiences as visible minorities living in places like Hawaii and Japan, something I did not find with my narrators from Western Europe and the Northeastern United States. Overall, the majority of the narrators had Western European ancestry and passed as white, though other racial and ethnic backgrounds were represented. Twenty-one of the interviewees were women and fourteen were men. Although these interviewees do not make up a representative sample of red haired people, their stories had resonance with those whom I interviewed outside of formalized redhead events. Even further, nearly every red-haired person I have met in either professional or personal circumstances during the time I have been working on this project has been familiar with the discourses my narrators describe. Therefore, while these interviews are not generalizable and are focused heavily on people who were already interested in matters of red hair, they do reflect major themes of the ginger phenomenon as it exists in the current moment.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 8.

### **1.2.3 Archival research**

Finally, I also completed archival research for this project. While in Scotland, I did research at the Edinburgh City Archives and the National Library of Scotland. Here, I accessed important documents not available to me in the US, such as the permit for a ginger pride parade, local advertisements for the Chromo 2 Redhead DNA test, and red haired iconography from the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. I also utilized art history and historical online databases through the University of Pittsburgh Library system. Though the majority of my data came from my interviews and online sources, I did include some archival sources in my analysis. For historical contextualization throughout the dissertation I also include examples of paintings, historical newspaper articles and classified advertisements, films, television shows, and physiognomic images.

## **1.3 CHAPTER BREAKDOWN**

In Chapter Two, I will contextualize the ginger phenomenon within a longer history of red hair prejudice, and describe the early processes of memefication. In Chapter Three, I will introduce the first of three major discourses that create the ginger as socially different: gender. I will discuss gendered stereotypes and their reflection of changing perceptions of white heteronormativity. In Chapter Four, I will introduce the second of three major discourses that position the ginger as strange: science. In this chapter, I will introduce claims about redheaded people that are based on genetic science and examine how they are represented and circulated in new media. In Chapter Five, I will introduce the final of the three major discourses, race. In this chapter I will analyze the various ways in which the ginger phenomenon stands in for

understandings about whiteness and difference online. In Chapter Six, the conclusion, I will summarize the previous chapters and point towards the continuing significance of the ginger in popular Anglo-American culture.

#### **1.4 A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY**

As I will explain in this dissertation, though the terms “ginger,” “redhead,” “redheaded,” and “red-haired” are often interchangeably, they each have particular connotations. Therefore, I will use them with specific intent. By the noun “ginger,” I mean to call attention to a person who fits the current crystallization of negative stereotypes discussed in this introduction. By the noun “redhead,” I refer to someone who is either sexualized or deemed part of the attractive side of the spectrum of red hair phenotypes. When I am attempting to be neutral and merely label or group people by hair color, I will use the adjectival phrases “redheaded people” or “red-haired people.” In the following chapter, I will present a brief overview of red hair prejudice, contextualizing the ginger phenomenon for the reader within this history.

## 2.0 HISTORY OF RED HAIR PREJUICE

Within the US context, the ginger phenomenon is a seemingly recent development. However, in this chapter, I will argue that redheads have in fact been viewed ambivalently for a long time. While social media have brought negative feelings towards gingers into popular consciousness and crystalized redheaded stereotypes into a recognizable kind of undesirable person, examples of redheaded prejudice can be found throughout recorded history. In what follows, I will first briefly review historic prejudice against redheads from ancient times through the early-twentieth century. Next, I will look at social science research from the 1970s-present that presents red hair as a physically and socially undesirable trait. I will summarize the experiences of my narrators who grew up with red hair during this time-period. Having established this historical context, I will turn my attention to the beginning of the ginger phenomenon. I will begin with an in-depth analysis of the “Ginger Kids” episode of *South Park* and then describe reactions to it, from both online sources and from my narrators who were adolescents during the initial airing. I will conclude by framing the episode, and the ginger phenomenon as a whole, as part of the “ambivalent internet.”

### 2.1 FROM SET(H) TO *SUMMER HEIGHTS HIGH*

Redheaded prejudice is documented as far back as ancient Egypt, with the evil god Set(h), who was marked by his red hair.<sup>1</sup> Hatred towards and fear of Set(h) is mirrored in that of the god Typhon (responsible for hot, dangerous winds) in ancient Greece, in whose name redheaded men

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey J. Tassie, “Bulls, Hair and the *teknu*: An Enigmatic Egyptian Custom Revisited (Burial of the Black Hairs),” *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* 11, no. 1 (2000): 36.

and even children were allegedly sacrificed.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, sacrifice of redheaded animals took place in Egypt and Rome, in order to aid corn crops. For example, Egyptians sacrificed red oxen in the springtime.<sup>3</sup> In the Greco-Roman world, slave characters were identified in theater by red wigs attached to their masks;<sup>4</sup> the identification of certain theatrical characters through red hair continued through Shakespeare's time, as described in the next section. Two other ancient groups, the Thracians and the Scythians, were also identified by their red hair and blue colored eyes. Both groups were viewed as barbarians and expert warriors by the Greeks.<sup>5</sup> Thracians were also associated with foxes, likely because they wore fox-skinned hats,<sup>6</sup> but such animal comparisons can also be found in *Physiognomics*, attributed to Aristotle, wherein he writes that those with red hair "are of bad character, witness the foxes."<sup>7</sup>

While the Greeks feared the Thracians and Scythians for what they viewed as their violent barbarian behavior, there is also evidence that they enslaved them.<sup>8</sup> The idea that redheaded slaves were "worth more" or were "more expensive" in Ancient Greek and Rome is a strange point of pride amongst online ginger communities and often included as an "interesting

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<sup>2</sup> Paull Franklin Baum, "Judas's Red Hair," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 21, no. 3 (1922): 525.

<sup>3</sup> John Gardner Wilkinson, *The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians, Volume 3* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1878), 400.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Mellinkoff, "Judas's Red Hair and the Jews," *Journal of Jewish Art* 9, no. 1 (1982): 32; David Wiles, "Greek Theatre and the Legitimation of Slavery," in *Slavery: And Other Forms of Unfree Labour*, ed. Leonie Archer (London: Routledge, 1988), 63.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph E. Skinner, *The Invention of Greek Ethnography: From Homer to Herodotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 85.

<sup>6</sup> Tyler Jo Smith and Dimitrios Plantzos, *A Companion to Greek Art* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), e-book edition.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Minor Works*, trans. W.S. Hett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 127.

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Guler, "The Impact of the Ancient Greek Slave Trade on Art in the Balkans," *Saber and Scroll* 2, no. 2 (2013), 19.

fact” in “listicles” about redheaded people, but is largely unsubstantiated.<sup>9</sup> Physiognomic interpretations of red hair have continued throughout the history of red hair prejudice, and into modern times. For example, in 2001, Irish judge Mary Fahey declared during a redheaded man’s sentencing hearing that, “I am a firm believer that hair coloring has an effect on temper, and your coloring suggests you have a temper.”<sup>10</sup>

In addition to histories from Ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt, the bible and artistic renderings based upon biblical figures reveal that red hair has been a marker of negative difference. Red hair represents impure sexuality in women. Lilith, a figure alluded to in the bible and based primarily on early Jewish and Babylonian mythology, was Adam’s alleged female partner prior to Eve.<sup>11</sup> The folklore surrounding Lilith describes her refusal to “lie beneath” and be subservient to Adam. Accordingly, Lilith has become a popular figure in Wiccan and other women-focused spiritual practices. At the same time, Lilith is also feared and was historically blamed for children’s deaths, women’s miscarriages, and the disappearance of men’s penises.<sup>12</sup> She is perhaps the earliest incarnation of the trope of the hypersexual redheaded woman. In an illuminated manuscript from a prayer book dated from the first quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Lillith is depicted as a serpent with reddish hair, extending the apple to Eve, who shares her hair color.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See for example: <https://twitter.com/UberFacts/status/880384613318889472>;  
<http://gingerparrot.co.uk/the-ancient-history-of-redheads-and-ginger-hair/>;  
<https://www.factretriever.com/redhead-facts>.

<sup>10</sup> Newsweek Staff, “Perspectives,” *Newsweek*, June 3, 2001,  
<http://www.newsweek.com/perspectives-153263>.

<sup>11</sup> Raphael Patai, “Lilith,” *Journal of American Folklore* 77, no. 306 (Oct.-Dec. 1964): 295.

<sup>12</sup> Vanessa Rousseau, “Eve and Lilith: Two Female Types of Procreation,” *Diogenes* 208 (2005): 96.

<sup>13</sup> Cornelia van Wulfschkercke, *Prayer Book*, illuminated manuscript on canvas,  
[http://library.artstor.org.pitt.idm.oclc.org/#/asset/PRINCETON\\_MANUSCRIPTS\\_1031319445](http://library.artstor.org.pitt.idm.oclc.org/#/asset/PRINCETON_MANUSCRIPTS_1031319445).



John Collier's *Lilith* (1862) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* (1866-68) are two additional visual representations of the persona attributed to Lilith.<sup>14</sup>

Like Lilith, Mary Magdalene is also often portrayed with red hair. Magdalene, the “reformed prostitute” and symbol of the fallen woman in the Catholic Church, also fits the trope of the sexually unchaste redheaded woman.<sup>15</sup> In addition to Lilith, Rossetti also painted Magdalene in *Mary Magdalene* (1877) with the same long red hair.<sup>16</sup> She was portrayed similarly by many other artists, including Francesco Gessi in *Penitent Mary Magdalene* (circa 1635-1640) and Frederick Sandys in *Mary Magdalene* (1858-60).<sup>17</sup> Even earlier, Susan Haskins argues that Mary Magdalene's red hair took on special significance during the Burgundian Hapsburg dynasty in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. She suggests that Magdalene's symbol was used not only religiously, but also politically, in order to make territorial claims.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Margaret of Austria may have chosen to depict her own self with red hair in portraits to align herself with Magdalene's identity for personal motives.<sup>19</sup>

While for women red hair has biblical associations with disobedience and sexual impropriety, for men, it represents untrustworthiness and evil, particularly when embodied by Jewish figures. Though his hair is never actually described as red in the New Testament, Judas

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<sup>14</sup> John Collier, *Lilith*, 1887, oil on canvas, <http://witcombe.sbc.edu/eve-women/collier-lilith.html> ; Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*, 1866-8, 1872-3, oil on canvas, 37 ½ by 32 in., <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s205.rap.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Harvey, *Red: A History of the Redhead*, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Mary Magdalene*, 1877, oil on canvas, 30 by 25 ½ inches, <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s250.rap.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Francesco Gessi, 1635, *Penitent Mary Magdalene*, oil on canvas, <http://www.knightstemplarorder.org/mary-magdalene>; Frederick Sandys, 1860, *Mary Magdalene*, oil on canvas, <http://www.artrenewal.org/pages/artist.php?artistid=478>.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Haskins, “Mary Magdalene and the Burgundian Question Author,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 73 (2017): 135.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

Iscariot is perhaps the most famous biblical figure that is represented with red hair through art.<sup>20</sup> As early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century artists painted him with identifiable stereotypes like a long nose and red hair.<sup>21</sup> During the Middle Ages, red was associated with “soldiers of the Antichrist” and Judas, along with Jewish people more generally, were represented with red wigs in morality plays.<sup>22</sup> In Elizabethan England, “Judas color” or “Judas colored” became another way to say “red,” and red hair continued to mark Jewishness in Shakespeare’s plays.<sup>23</sup> By the nineteenth century, in British literature both darkness and redness were associated with social and racial deviance, as well as criminality. For example, this stereotype can be seen in Dickens’s infamous character of Fagin from *Oliver Twist*.<sup>24</sup> Dickens’ introduction of Fagin reads: “with a toasting-fork in his hand, was a very old shriveled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair.”<sup>25</sup>

### 2.1.1 The British context

There are several theories as to why red hair is disliked across various geographical settings today. One reason, as just described, is red hair’s association with Jewishness. However, overall the connection between Jewishness and red hair is stronger within Eastern European cultures than it is in Western Europe and the US, Canada and Australia. The two most common theories in British popular culture are that it reminds people of the Vikings’ invasion of the Saxons, or

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<sup>20</sup> Mellinkoff, “Judas’s Red Hair and the Jews,” 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Baum, “Judas’s Red Hair,” 521.

<sup>24</sup> Heather Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 75.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. Tom Crawford, Dover Thrift Edition (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002), 48.

that it is closely associated with colonized Irishness, and thus looked down upon as an undesirable characteristic. Again the dichotomy of both fearing and hating, or both being dominated by and dominating a group delineated by their red hair becomes apparent here. In an interview with the national Scottish newspaper the *Scotsman*, Dr. Donna Heddle suggests that Viking warriors were responsible for the arrival of the MC1R mutation in the British Isles. As of yet, this theory has not been confirmed, though there is some evidence to support it.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, such negative connotations are taken up in popular discourse and put forth as rationales as to why people in Great Britain do not like redheads. In another example, a news story from 2013 claims that “Brits’ Anglo-on-orange issues stem from our hatred of our Scandinavian invaders, the Vikings – purportedly a people dense with gingers.”<sup>27</sup>

Use of the word ginger itself began around 1823 within the British context. The full definition from the Oxford English Dictionary reads: “A person with reddish-yellow or (light) orange-brown hair, typically characterized by pale skin and freckles; (more generally) any person with reddish hair. Frequently as a nickname. Sometimes *derogatory*, reflecting negative attitudes towards red-headed people.” Additionally, by the mid-1960s, ginger was used occasionally as an offensive gay slur. This transition is interesting because even though the latter meaning is not common today, part of the ginger stereotype for men is that they are

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<sup>26</sup> Marc Horne, “Expert Argues Vikings Carried Redhead Gene to Scotland,” *The Scotsman*, November 23, 2013, <http://www.scotsman.com/heritage/people-places/expert-argues-vikings-carried-redhead-gene-to-scotland-1-3200177>.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Margolis, “How Americans Can Help Brits Get Over Their Anti-Ginger Bias,” 2013, <http://www.bbcamerica.com/anglophenia/2013/02/red-headed-rudeness-why-brits-need-to-get-over-their-anti-ginger-bias>.

heterosexually unappealing and do not possess any traits of normative masculinity – qualities often falsely conflated with homosexuality.<sup>28</sup>

### 2.1.2 The American context

Within the US popular consciousness, red hair is much more often associated with Irish people than it is with Vikings, presumably because the Viking invasion is not something referenced often in American culture, whereas the mistreatment of Irish immigrants is. The Irish connection is also part of British discussions of gingerism, since the colonization of Ireland and the mass immigration of Irish people to the US was a result of the British invasion of Ireland and its consequences, such as tenant eviction during the great famine. In her reading of the redheaded woman as a cultural icon in the Anglo American world, Amanda Third suggests that redheaded women are contemporarily understood in ambivalent ways because of England's colonization and subsequent racialization of Ireland.<sup>29</sup> Again, this theory is not substantiated by much evidence, but it is often put forth in online discussions about "gingerism," as I will discuss further in Chapter Five. The reasons put forth in online discourses for anti-redhead sentiments in Ireland and Canada are similar to those described above.

The ambivalence that Third describes can be seen in popular US press's treatment of red hair in the 18<sup>th</sup> through 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. At times, it was a marker of difference in association with criminal behavior. Red hair and freckles were often emphasized in advertisements warning about

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<sup>28</sup> "ginger, n. and adj.1". OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/78372?rskey=qGT4i2&result=1> (accessed October 10, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Amanda Third, "Does the Rug Match the Carpet? Race, Gender and the Redheaded Woman," in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 221.

or offering rewards for runaway servants or military deserters. For example, on June 22, 1721 an ad was posted in *The American Weekly Mercury* of Philadelphia which read, “Run away from Major Doudall, a servant Man named John Anderson, a cooper by trade, aged about 20 years, of a middling stature, very red hair and very much freckled...50 shillings reward...”<sup>30</sup> Another, posted in the *Pennsylvania Journal* for 17 year old Edward Collier described him as having, “red hair, freckled face, had when he went away, an iron collar.”<sup>31</sup> Ads were also placed for runaway women servants: “Run-away...an Irish Servant Girl named Katy Colbey, about 20 Years of Age, has red Hair and pretty much freckled in her Face.”<sup>32</sup> Rewards were also offered for locating and returning military defectors. An ad in the *Boston News-Letter* on June 13, 1715 sought the return of deserted sailor Henry Miller, describing him as a “thick gross man” with “bushy red hair, several black spots on his face.”<sup>33</sup> As seen in the above examples, some ads explicitly labeled these people as Irish, while others did not.

Slightly later in American history, in the mid 1800s, Third’s analysis of red hair’s ambivalence becomes even more relevant. Writers begin to recognize the dichotomy within red hair and positioned it as a beauty ideal at times and as a deeply unattractive feature at others. In 1862 the *Southern Literary Messenger* published a piece called “Red Hair,” in which it explained, “on the one hand, we find that red hair (or rather a certain shade of it) has been both popularly and poetically associated with all ugliness, all vice, and all malignity, a more pleasing variety of the same hue has been associated with all loveliness, all meekness, and all innocence.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, in 1867 Elsey Hay claimed in “A Plea for Red Hair,” that “while our

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<sup>30</sup> “Advertisement,” *American Weekly Mercury*, June 22, 1721.

<sup>31</sup> “Advertisement,” *Pennsylvania Journal*, March 3, 1747.

<sup>32</sup> “Advertisement,” *New-York Gazette*, December 12, 1765.

<sup>33</sup> “Advertisements,” *Boston News-Letter*, June 20, 1715.

<sup>34</sup> “Red Hair,” *Southern Literary Messenger; Devoted to Every Department of Literature, and the Fine Arts* 18 (1862): 34, 38.

crowning feature seems to be acknowledged as the highest type of ideal beauty [because it is used in art to depict angels], it is, at the same time, regarded as a trait of positive ugliness in real life.”<sup>35</sup> In an 1882 article from the *Daily Picayune* describing what colors best complement red hair and which to avoid wearing, the author writes, “Until very lately the red-haired class has been in modern times admired only by artists.” The author further makes red hair’s beauty conditional by typifying it. In what is perhaps a forerunner to the distinction between the “redhead” and the “ginger,” without labeling it as such, the author writes that “The most difficult of the red-haired type to dress is the sandy-haired with light eye lashes...it is hardly ever accompanied with a fine complexion.”<sup>36</sup>

In mid-twentieth century America, redheadedness again became associated with criminality; this time with specific reference to “outlaws” during frontier expansion. In an article published in *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* in 1947, Hans von Hentig argued that there are “some distinct physical characteristics are found in criminals”<sup>37</sup> and that “it must be concluded that the number of redheaded men among the noted outlaws surpassed their rate in the normal population” during frontier life.<sup>38</sup> While he acknowledged that the correlation was not necessarily due to an inherent biological trait, von Hentig maintained that “biological variations become social forces” when a person is negatively stigmatized by others.<sup>39</sup>

Continuing into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two major media developments again highlighted red hair: film colorization via Technicolor in the 1930s and the move to color television in the early 1960s. Overall, these transitions made redheadedness more visible in popular culture, thus

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<sup>35</sup> Elsey Hay, “A Plea for Red Hair,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine*, July 1867.

<sup>36</sup> “Red Hair and Beauty,” *Daily Picayune*, January 1, 1882.

<sup>37</sup> Hans Von Hentig, “Redhead and Outlaw: A Study in Criminal Anthropology,” *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 38, no. 1 (1947): 1.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

reinforcing and extending the prevailing stereotypes. For example, film star Danny Kaye's red hair connoted his Jewishness and led to his roles as a sexual and gender ambiguous comedic figure.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, in *Gone with the Wind*, Leslie Howard plays Ashley Wilkes—the effete foil to the hypermasculine Clark Gable. In television, Ron Howard's Richie Cunningham is an early example of the ginger nerd. As I will discuss further in Chapter Three, by this time, redheaded women were typically sexualized, especially in film. Examples include Rita Hayworth in *Cover Girl*, Moira Shearer in *The Red Shoes*, and Maureen O'Hara in *The Quiet Man*. In television, sexualized representations also dominated, but at times portrayals also leaned slightly more towards the ginger end of the spectrum, such as Carol Burnette's quirky characters on her self-titled show.

### 2.1.3 The Australian context

In Australia, in addition to ginger, there are two other controversial words for redheads. The first is “bluey,” which has been used since the mid-1800s.<sup>41</sup> There are several competing historical explanations for how the term bluey became used as synonym for redhead. One theory is that Australian culture embraces irony, and so it is a cultural joke that a person with red hair would be termed “blue.”<sup>42</sup> Another theory suggests that Irish immigrants to Australia in the mid-1800s

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<sup>40</sup> Steven Cohan, “The Manic Bodies of Danny Kaye,” *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 3 (Spring 2017): 5, 1.

<sup>41</sup> “bluey, adj. and n.”. OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press.  
<http://www.oed.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/20625> (accessed October 12, 2017)

<sup>42</sup> “blue, adj. and n.”. OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press.  
<http://www.oed.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/20577> (accessed October 12, 2017)

were stereotyped as always looking for fights. “Blue” at the time was a slang word for fight, so “bluey” referred to the Irish immigrants, some of whom were likely redheaded.<sup>43</sup>

The second Australian-specific term for redhead is ranga, which is an abbreviated form of “orangutan.” The Australian Oxford Dictionary added the term in 2012, defining it as “a person with red hair.” Prior to its addition to the AOD, the Australian National Dictionary Center featured it as “word of the month.”<sup>44</sup> In its monthly newsletter, the ANDC described two major cultural events that increased the word’s popularity.<sup>45</sup> The first was an episode of the mockumentary comedy show, *Summer Heights High* in 2007. One of the main characters in the show is disruptive student, Jonah Takalua who has “anger issues and development stuff.”<sup>46</sup> Takalua is played by the show’s creator, white actor/comedian Chris Liley, but the character is Polynesian. Jonah and his Polynesian friends get in trouble for bullying Ben, a much smaller white redheaded student. Jonah’s explanation for why it was okay to bully Ben is: “well, people are racist to us, so we can be racist to rangas.”<sup>47</sup> The joke was parallel in some ways to the 2005 *South Park* episode, “Ginger Kids,” which will be analyzed later in this chapter. In another example, in 2008, the Adelaide Zoo offered free entry for all redheads in order to bring attention to the endangered orangutan. The announcement received public backlash and the campaign was

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<sup>43</sup> “What Does ‘Bluey’ Mean?,” *Ginger Parrot*, n.d. <http://gingerparrot.co.uk/ginger-dictionary/bluey-definition>.

<sup>44</sup> Alex Ivett, “‘Ranga’ Added to the New Edition of Australian Oxford Dictionary,” *Australian Times*, December 12, 2012, <http://www.australiantimes.co.uk/ranga-added-to-new-edition-of-australian-oxford-dictionary/>.

<sup>45</sup> Oxford Australia, “Word of The Month: Ranga,” Australian National Dictionary Centre Newsletter, November, 2012.

<sup>46</sup> *Summer Heights High*. “Episode 2,” directed by Stuart McDonald, written by Chris Lilley (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Company, September 12, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> *Summer Heights High*. “Episode 1,” directed by Stuart McDonald, written by Chris Lilley (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Company, September 5, 2007).



soon ended.<sup>48</sup> In 2010, the term took on a slightly more positive valence when Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard publically announced that she was happy to be recognized as a “ranga icon.”<sup>49</sup>

Overall, redheaded people have been viewed negatively, or at least ambivalently, since ancient times. Although there have been intermittent positive perceptions, they do not seem to be as stable as the negative ones. Stereotypes about redheaded people have taken on slightly different forms depending on the popular media formats of the time. Likewise, geographical location and cultural histories also influence the particular formation of red hair stereotypes. In the next section, I will share the experiences of people who grew up influenced by some of the (later) discourses described above, prior to the explosion of the ginger phenomenon as it currently exists on social media.

## **2.2 PRE-INTERNET ERA ORAL HISTORIES**

Many redheaded people have internalized these histories about red hair. For some, their hair is deeply connected to their religious or national identities, or those of their ancestors. Others cite mythologies such as those described above as the root of stereotypes that continue today. For narrators born in the 1960s and earlier, having red hair, pale skin and freckles was a social difference that at times made them feel special, but more frequently, made them feel ostracized

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<sup>48</sup> Word of the Month: Ranga,” 2012. Similar campaigns took place in Ireland in 2010: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-11742283> and in the UK from 2015 to 2017: <http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/whats-on/family-kids-news/twycross-zoo-red-head-free-13423460>.

<sup>49</sup> “Word of the Month: Ranga,” 2012.

from their peers, in various ways.<sup>50</sup> Many of these narrators told stories about feeling like they stood out. Andii Bowsher shared with me an anecdote about growing up in the late 1960s in the Midlands, England:

We had typical kinds of stories and I can remember European fairy stories being told. For example, one of the things I remember picking up from those was that the heroes and the heroines, [when] their physical attributes were described, they would normally be dark haired, raven black hair, skin like porcelain, those particular types of things – certainly not freckled, absolutely pale skin, it would be unblemished. This idea that they would be black-haired or have dark eyes or something like that. Strangely, I don't remember much of the blue eyes, blonde hair kind of stuff, you know, in any of these stories. Maybe it was there and I just didn't hear it, but what I remember being impressed by was the ideal physical type being held up was not what I belonged to, in that sense, so that gave me a message, which I took to heart. I didn't therefore think of myself as physically attractive because of those kinds of messages, I guess.<sup>51</sup>

Of the mid 1970s, Andii explained:

at secondary school, I was a bit more aware of being teased, for being redheaded, and fair skinned. It's not just being redheaded, it's being fair skinned that was the problem. I do remember at junior school the fair skin thing being an issue. Fair skin and freckles were clearly not regarded as beauty accents, as it were, commonly. So there would be occasional comments, and it was quite clear that the admirations were towards people who physically tanned. I didn't, I went red, and eventually had more freckles. I was very conscious of that, that I was pale, in comparison with this kind of standard that seemed to be out there.

From a young age, Andii felt that he did not meet society's standards for attractiveness, based on his skin tone and hair color. Dark hair and non-freckled, tanned (but still white) skin were held up of models of masculine heroism and attractiveness. Andii also importantly calls attention to the fact that having pale skin and freckles equally affected his self-perception even more than his red hair, though red hair often stands in for both in popular discourse. However,

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<sup>50</sup> Notably, only one person I met throughout my all of oral history interviewing felt like their hair color was not something that made them identifiable amongst their peers, neither physically nor socially. Chris Dearth, who was born in Long Beach CA in 1955, does not recall specific attention paid to his red hair. He said, "It wasn't a big deal. Nobody treated it as abnormal." Chris Dearth, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Andii Bowsher oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Edinburgh, UK, August 5, 2015.

Andii's detailed reflection on his physical appearance was unique among the accounts of the men that I interviewed. Women were much more likely to comment upon themes including sexualization and attractiveness. For example, Karen Olin, born in 1956 in Santa Cruz CA, remembers being young and "watching Miss America [with my mom] and I made some remark about 'how come there's no redheads?' My mom told me, 'because they're considered too sensual and so they'll never be Miss America.'" Karen learned early on that redheaded women were viewed as hypersexual and as having bad tempers. She says that she was not aware of any such stereotypes for men, but attributed that to the fact that both her father and brother were redheads themselves, and thus she knew them as full people rather than stereotypes.<sup>52</sup> Themes of gendered red hair will be explored in more depth in Chapter Three.

Narrators also shared a variety of nicknames, typically unwanted, with which they were ascribed during childhood. Barbara and Vicki, friends who grew up in London in the 1960s and 1970s, remember feeling like they "[stood] out from everybody else." Barbara was teasingly called "Anne of Green Gables." *Anne of Green Gables* is the title character from the 1908 novel by Lucy Maud Montgomery. She is an orphan sent to live with a family (who expects to receive a boy to help with farm work) on Prince Edward Island in Canada. Anne's red hair, temper, and non-feminine, improper behaviors are the subject of many of her adventures, which have been adapted for film, television, and theater.<sup>53</sup> Steve O'Shea, born in 1956 in the Pacific Northwest

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<sup>52</sup> Karen Olin, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Barbara and Vicki, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Crosshaven, Ireland, August 22, 2015. Scholars have argued for the significance of Anne's red hair to her character development and iconicity. Kelly Blewett suggests that her red hair positions her into a pre-Raphaelite visual model in, "An Unfortunate Lily Maid: Transgressive Reading in Anne of Green Gables," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 39, no. 3 (2015): 282. Sarah Conrad Gothie argues that by "playing Anne," by wearing souvenir straw hats with red braids attached, people rehearse themes from the novel, which influences their understanding of Prince Edward Island as tourists, in "Playing 'Anne': Red Braids, Green Gables, and Literary Tourists on Prince Edward Island," *Tourist Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 406.

of the US remembers being called various names, such as “carrot top,” and “little red,” as well as being taunted with the saying “I’d rather be dead than red in the head.”<sup>54</sup> Catherine was also teased with “carrot top” and “red,” growing up in Dallas, Texas, in the 1950s. She shared with me her feelings about this: “I can actually remember as a teenager, when we try so hard to fit in, not liking my hair. It really felt like, ‘oh, why can’t I just have brown hair like everybody else?’”<sup>55</sup>

For most narrators growing up prior to the 1970s, having red hair, light skin, and freckles were attributes that made them easy targets for teasing by their peers. However, for some people, it went much farther than teasing and could be considered traumatic. Gerhard was born in 1949 in a small village in Germany, where he suffered tremendous prejudice due to his physical appearance. He believes that because he looked physical different from the other brown and blonde haired children he hung around with, he was more memorable. Thus, he was often individually accused of and punished by the police for small crimes that the children all committed together. Gerhard also felt that in school he was not only bullied by peers, but also by teachers. This led to very low self-esteem that has lasted into adulthood. In a group meeting at the Irish Redhead Festival in 2015, he admitted that the phrase “oh look, a red fox, but [what a] shame [I have] no gun,” still deeply upsets him to this day.<sup>56</sup>

Narrators’ experiences from this time-period show that having red hair was a social difference that led to feelings of ostracization in childhood. However, the particular stereotypes of the ginger, organized claims of discrimination, and of course social media as we understand it, did not yet exist. The time frame for these experiences described in this section, the 1950s to

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<sup>54</sup> Steve O’Shea, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Catherine Marin, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Gerhard, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Crosshaven, Ireland, August 22, 2015.

1970s, precedes and slightly overlaps with the earliest examples of social science research presented below.

### **2.3 SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH ON PEOPLE WITH RED HAIR**

My survey of international social science research on red hair from 1971 to 2014 shows that redheads have generally been considered less attractive and less socially desirable than white people with other hair colors, and at times people of all races, for more than three decades before the ginger phenomenon began in the US. However, prior to the ginger phenomenon, social science research either highlighted red hair prejudice as a surprising finding or attempted to biologically explain it. These studies found a general distaste towards redheads, but did not specify the ginger type as de-gendered and “creepy.” In 1971, Edwin Lawson found that men and women within the US preferred dark hair and blonde hair over red hair, in both other men and women.<sup>57</sup> Saul Feinman and George W. Gill found in 1978 that amongst Caucasian, heterosexual men and women, there was a “tremendous aversion” to people with red hair and people with very light skin.<sup>58</sup> In fact, more women disliked very fair skin on men (both with freckles and without) than disliked black or brown skin, a finding that is interesting to consider, given the predominantly white racial demographics of Wyoming (where the study was completed) in the late 1970s.<sup>59</sup> The authors present this as a surprising finding and call for more research to be done. Responding to Feinman and Gill’s call, Dennis E. Clayson and Michael L. Klassen further investigated social perceptions towards redheads in the U.S. They found, on the

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<sup>57</sup> Edwin D. Von Hentig, “Redhead and Outlaw: A Study in Criminal Anthropology.” *Psychological Reports* 28, no. 1 (1971): 313.

<sup>58</sup> Saul Feinman and George W. Gill, “Sex Differences in Physical Attractiveness Preferences,” *Journal of Social Psychology* 105, no. 1 (1978): 50.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

one hand, that redheaded women were seen as “no-nonsense,” professional, and physically unattractive. Redheaded men, on the other hand, were viewed as unsuccessful and even more unattractive. Clayson and Klassen suggested that “a person simply may not be that attractive with very light skin, no tan, and freckles, combined with an unusual hair color.” They attributed this to biology, suggesting that redheads display unattractive “phenotypical expressions of poor health.”<sup>60</sup>

In terms of personality, Susan Weir and Margaret Fine-Davis found that redheaded women were perceived as more aggressive than blondes or brunettes, which is consistent with the “temperamental” or “fiery” redheaded stereotype. Although they note that myths and superstitions about redheaded people are popular in Irish folklore, the authors also offer a biological explanation for the cultural dislike of redheads. They suggest that within nature, red markings act as “threatening stimuli” and are signs of danger. They imply that this is why the color red is often used as a warning in Western societies (i.e., a red stop sign). Furthermore, they associate the color red with fire, and suggest that the metaphorical description of redheads as “fiery” might be unconsciously influenced by the primal biological stimulus of the color red.<sup>61</sup>

By the 1970s, dyeing one’s hair had become socially acceptable, at least for women.<sup>62</sup> Loreal introduced their famous slogan “Because I’m worth it,” into US markets in 1971, linking hair dyeing and female empowerment during the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminist movement.<sup>63</sup> Hair color was

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<sup>60</sup> Dennis E. Clayson and Michael L. Klassen, “Perception of Attractiveness by Obesity and Hair Color,” *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 68, no. 1 (1989): 815-16.

<sup>61</sup> Susan Weir and Margret Fine-Davis, “‘Dumb Blonde’ and ‘Temperamental Redhead’: The Effect of Hair Colour on Some Attributed Personality Characteristics of Women,” *Irish Journal of Psychology* 10, no. 1 (1989): 17–18.

<sup>62</sup> Taylor Stephan and Diana Nguyen, “A Brief History of Hair Coloring and Dye Trends - From Coal Tar to Unicorn Tresses,” *E! Online*, August 3, 2015, <http://www.eonline.com/news/682833/a-brief-history-of-hair-coloring-and-dye-trends-from-coal-tar-to-unicorn-tresses>.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

viewed as a “choice,” rather than a natural or inherent attribute, which may account for the initial increase in social scientific reporting of attitudes towards hair color.<sup>64</sup> Research on hair color preferences and prejudice was likely influenced by the search for a unified theory of prejudice that sought to explain discrimination across social categories. One such example is Thomas Pettigrew’s, 1979 article, “The Ultimate Attribution Error: Extending Allport’s Cognitive Analysis of Prejudice,” based on Gordon Allport’s 1954 book, *The Nature of Prejudice*.<sup>65</sup> Early studies on hair color prejudice were also similarly influenced by social scientific work that examined the psychological processes behind stereotyping, broadly, without specific consideration of particular social categories or identities.<sup>66</sup>

In 1997 Druann Maria Heckert and Amy Best completed the most comprehensive study of attitudes towards red hair to date. Their research took place within a US context. Rather than considering attitudes towards all hair colors as many of the studies above did, they focus particularly on the experiences of redheaded individuals. Heckert and Best conceptualize red hair as a stigmatized form of deviance, albeit a minor one.<sup>67</sup> They investigate the effects that being labeled as a redhead in childhood has on one’s identity. Participants in the study identified the following stereotypes associated with red hair: redheads are either extraordinarily beautiful or

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<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, a popular argument against anti-ginger remarks today is that your hair color is “something you can’t change” or it is “something you are born with.” Such remarks often preface comparisons between so-called gingerism and other forms of discrimination, mainly racism and ableism. The “born this way” argument will be addressed in Chapter Five.

<sup>65</sup> Rebecca Leffler, “L’Oreal Fetes 40th Anniversary of ‘Because You’re Worth It’ in Paris,” *Hollywood Reporter*, November 14, 2011, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/fash-track/l-oreal-jane-fonda-freida-pinto-261216>.; Thomas F. Pettigrew, “The Ultimate Attribution Error: Extending Allport’s Cognitive Analysis of Prejudice,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 5, no. 4 (1979): 461–76.

<sup>66</sup> Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1954).

<sup>67</sup> Druann Maria Heckert and Amy Best, “Ugly Duckling to Swan : Labeling Theory and the Stigmatization of Red Hair,” *Symbolic Interaction* 20, no. 4 (1997): 369.

extraordinarily ugly, they have flaring tempers, they are clowns, they are “weird,” Irish, sun-challenged, and intellectually superior, and redheaded women are wild, while redheaded men are wimps.<sup>68</sup> Red-haired participants in this study also confessed that being labeled as deviant from childhood due to their red hair led to negative treatment from peers, lowered self-esteem, a profound sense of being different from others, and a feeling of always being the center of attention even when it was not desired.<sup>69</sup> Participants in Heckert and Best’s study also shared a variety of teasing names they were called as children due to their hair color. The authors argue that such name-calling reinforces stereotypes and also emphasizes red hair as a social difference.<sup>70</sup> The term “ginger,” however, did not come up in their interviews. Overall, most participants in this study were happy with their hair color once they reached adulthood, implying that redheaded bullying was perhaps similar to any other form of childhood bullying.<sup>71</sup>

Since the advent of the ginger phenomenon, social science studies about hair color preferences have continued to be conducted. However, a shift has taken place, wherein in these more recent studies, the authors begin from the presumption that negative stereotypes against red haired people already exist, rather than being surprised by their findings. For example, in 1978, Feinman and Gill asked, “Why is there such an aversion to redheads?” and stated that “the finding that one particular hair color is so strongly disliked by both sexes is striking.”<sup>72</sup> By 2013, however, Nicolas Guéguen and Lubomir Lamy, in explaining why, in their social psychology experiment, redheads were less able to get people to answer surveys than people of other hair

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 370-76.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 376-80.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 376.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>72</sup> Feinman and Gill, “Sex Differences in Physical Attractiveness Preferences,” 50.



colors, simply say the result is “explained by the negative stereotype associated with red hair.”<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, attempts to biologically explain anti-redhead sentiments are no longer made in academic work, though they are still made in commercial science research and within the broader popular culture, as I will discuss in Chapter Four.

Beginning in the early 2000s, a number of social psychological studies further confirmed that redheads are less socially desirable than people with other hair colors. Viren Swami and Seishin Barrett found that men approach redheaded women less often than women with other hair colors in heterosexual courtship settings in England,<sup>74</sup> while Nicolas Guéguen found that courtship solicitations by redheaded men to women are refused more often than by those of men of other hair colors, in France. Guéguen attributes his findings to negative French stereotypes about redheaded people, generally.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, Margaret Takeda, Marilyn M. Helms, and Natalia Romanova found that redheads are overrepresented as CEOs within the 500 top-earning English business organizations. However, the researchers surmise that the reason redheads are overrepresented in these positions is due to their stereotypes as “competent, though not particularly likeable.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Nicolas Guéguen and Lubomir Lamy, “Women’s Hair Color and Survey Response Rate: A Field Experiment,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 23, no. 3 (2013): 386.

<sup>74</sup> Viren Swami and Seishin Barrett, “British Men’s Hair Color Preferences : An Assessment of Courtship Solicitation and Stimulus Ratings,” *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* 52 (2011): 598.

<sup>75</sup> Nicolas Guéguen, “Hair Color and Courtship: Blond Women Received More Courtship Solicitations and Redhead Men Received More Refusals,” *Psychological Studies* 57, no. 4 (2012): 371-74.

<sup>76</sup> Margaret Takeda, Marilyn M. Helms, and Natalia Romanova, “Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment Hair Color Stereotyping and CEO Selection in the United Kingdom Hair Color Stereotyping and CEO Selection in the United Kingdom,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 13, no. 3 (2006): 93.

In his 2014 dissertation, “Gender Difference in Prejudice Toward Redheads,” based on research completed with Canadian participants, L. James Climenhage began to acknowledge the specificity of the gendered aspects of the ginger phenomenon by asking whether current prejudices against red-haired men are the result of bias against “gender-atypical people.”<sup>77</sup> He found that redheaded men were seen as less masculine, less sexually attractive, and less gender prototypical than men with other hair colors.<sup>78</sup> Redheaded boys were seen as less well-liked than boys with other hair colors.<sup>79</sup> Redheaded women and girls were not viewed significantly differently from their other hair color counterparts.<sup>80</sup> Climenhage also found that men perpetuate this prejudice more than women.<sup>81</sup> As I will discuss in Chapter Three, the image of the emasculated ginger man acts as a form of gender regulation for white men. Importantly, all of these studies focus solely on hair color, and not on the other features that often accompany the red-hair physicality, namely extreme paleness, freckles, and light eyelashes and eyebrows. These features are arguably even more important in the construction of the ginger as Other, although “red hair” as a descriptor often comes to stand in for these other markers.

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<sup>77</sup> L. James Climenhage, “Gender Difference in Prejudice Toward Redheads” (PhD diss., Simon Fraser University, 2014), v.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

## 2.4 THE “GINGER KIDS” *SOUTH PARK* EPISODE

The word “ginger” has a long history in the UK, both as an insult and a descriptor of red hair. As previously mentioned, its usage to describe redheaded people began in 1823.<sup>82</sup> However, the term did not become widely used in the US until the mid-2000s. In 2005, the popular and at times controversial animated series, *South Park*, introduced the term “ginger” to an American audience. A popular defense of *South Park* is that it “makes fun of everyone,” so there is no need for any particular group to be offended by the show’s often-critiqued portrayals. However, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock questions whether this “anti-PC ethic” creates equal-opportunity humor, or whether it actually conceals social inequities, and gives its (typically) white, male audience members license to use derogatory stereotypes.<sup>83</sup> The November 9, 2005 episode, “Ginger Kids,” begins with main character Eric Cartman’s school presentation entitled, “Ginger Kids: Children with Red Hair, Light Skin, and Freckles.” He asserts that they “creep us out and make us feel sick to our stomachs.” Cartman further explains that ginger kids are afflicted with a disease called “gingervitis,” which occurs because they “have no souls.” The assertion that gingers do not have souls was one of the most “memefied” aspects of the show and was taken up in a variety of different contexts that will be discussed in later chapters.

Cartman’s visual display features real photographs of redheaded children, accompanied by his interjection of “sick!” or “gross!” every time he changes the slide to feature a new child. Moving through the slides, he compares ginger kids’ very light skin and need to avoid the sun to

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<sup>82</sup> “ginger, n. and adj.1”. OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/78372?rskey=NfAfIV&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed October 10, 2017).

<sup>83</sup> Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “Introduction: Taking South Park Seriously,” in *Taking South Park Seriously*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (SUNY Press, Albany, 2008), 13–14.

that of vampires. The other students in the class shudder at this thought. Classmate Kyle interjects that he himself has red hair, but does not have to avoid the sun. Cartman replies that redheads who do not have red skin or freckles are called “Daywalkers.”<sup>84</sup> Kyle, becoming increasingly upset, exclaims that Cartman’s talk “isn’t a presentation, it’s a hate speech! People aren’t creeped out by gingers!” However, another student in the class quietly admits, “I am.”

Cartman concludes that:

the ginger gene is a curse, and unless we work to rid the earth of that curse, the gingers could envelop our lives in blackness, for all time. It is time that we all admit to ourselves that gingers are vile and disgusting.

After the presentation, Kyle calls Cartman a “stupid supremacist asswipe” and sets out to “disprove his hateful rumors.” Kyle warns his friend Stan that the hateful ignorance Cartman has incited may lead to dangerous consequences. The two boys go to interview the Foleys, a family with three ginger children, to “learn the facts” about redheads. When the Foley children open the door, they answer “hello,” in unsettling unison. Their freckles are extremely exaggerated. The children’s parents both have brown hair and eyes. They explain that the ginger gene is recessive and the odds of them having a ginger child were only 1 out of 4, but somehow it happened three times. The father begins to cry at their misfortune. The mother further explains that if both partners carry the recessive gene, their children can “turn out...like...them.” Kyle, beginning to feel unsure about the situation tentatively asks, “but...it’s not true they have no souls?” Horror

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<sup>84</sup> “Creator Commentary, Ginger Kids,” <http://southpark.cc.com/clips/frshlr/creator-commentary-ginger-kids>. Parker and Stone give a practical explanation for this in their directors’ commentary on the episode, saying that they made this distinction because they had already said in the show that Kyle had red hair, but he clearly didn’t have light skin and freckles. However, the fact that certain redheaded individuals are “exempt” from the negative qualities associated with being ginger, both sets up the “spectrum of redheadedness,” and gives a convenient “out” to people who make anti-ginger statements, but wish to qualify their statement to only apply to certain people. Additionally, Kyle’s character is Jewish, and redheadedness, though not necessarily freckles, is an Eastern European stereotype of Jewish people.

music sets in and the father quickly ushers Kyle and Stan out the door. As a final piece of advice, he tells them, “look, boys, if you really don’t want to have ginger kids, marry an Asian woman. Asians don’t carry the recessive gene. I know a guy who’s marrying a Japanese woman very soon for just that reason.” The advice is purportedly based on Parker’s own “gingerphobia” and recent engagement (at the time) to a Japanese woman.<sup>85</sup> Although the episode could be read as an allegory for discrimination based on any kind of physical or social difference, with this statement, the episode begins to focus on race.

The next scene opens with Kyle’s own presentation: a genetic analysis of red hair meant to refute Cartman’s claims from the day before. As the class heads to recess, Cartman warns his classmates, “make no mistake: ginger kids are evil.” He reminds them that Judas was a redhead and that he “just got Jesus killed, that’s all.” Cartman insists that he’s “just saying what everyone else already thinks: ginger kids are creepy.” As the children move to lunch, Kyle, Stan, and their friend Kenny observe a group bullying a redheaded boy out of the cafeteria, telling him “ginger kids eat in the hallway!” Notably, the bullies include male students Token Black and Jimmy, who walks with crutches due to a physical disability. The fact that Parker and Stone use these traditionally marginalized characters as bullies is significant in two ways. First, it positions gingeriness as the least socially desirable set of physical attributes, even beneath those of historically marginalized groups. Secondly, it reflects white masculinity’s search for a socially

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<sup>85</sup> “Creator Commentary, Ginger Kids,” n.d., <http://southpark.cc.com/clips/frshlr/creator-commentary-ginger-kids>. In the directors’ commentary, Parker states that the “guy” referenced by Mr. Foley is himself. At the time of the episode’s airing he was engaged to now ex-wife Emma Sugiyama. Parker states that he has “nothing against” ginger people, but is “creeped out” by them. Because the redheaded gene mutation is rare amongst Asian populations, he explains that by having children with a Japanese woman, he will not be at risk of having a redheaded child. However, Mr. Foley’s claim that “Asians don’t carry the recessive gene” is untrue.

acceptable group to victimize, that will not result in the bully being labeled as racist, or discriminatory more generally.

Angered by the growing prejudice, Kyle decides to teach Cartman a lesson. That night, Kyle, Stan, and Kenny enter Cartman's room while he is sleeping. Stan opens his bag and reveals red hair dye, skin bleach, and a henna kit inside. The boys enact their plan. When Eric sees his reflection in the mirror the following morning, horror music again swells. He has been transformed into a ginger. Eric's mother takes him to a doctor who tells them that there is no cure for Eric's sudden onset gingervitis. Pulling Mrs. Cartman aside, the doctor quietly suggests that she might "just want to put him down." On the bus the next morning, Cartman sits down next to another classmate, Butters, who laughs himself into tears at Cartman's new appearance. Cartman is then excluded from the cafeteria during lunchtime. Stan and Kyle are thrilled and hope that Cartman will learn the lesson they intended to teach him about inciting prejudice based on physical appearance. However, of course this does not happen. In the next scene Cartman stands behind a podium. He speaks to an audience of nine other ginger kids, shouting and pounding on the podium: "I don't know about you, but I for one, am sick and tired of being discriminated against!" The audience agrees. Cartman continues:

Just because we have red hair, light skin, and freckles, we're somehow thought of as less important, and it's bullcrap! Kids at school laugh at us, doctors call us genetically inferior, the world needs to know that we are people with feelings. And our parents love us for who we are!

Cartman encourages his fellow gingers to think about important historical redheads, but the only one they can come up with is Ron Howard. The group moves outside and marches, shouting "red power!" Several of them hold umbrellas to shield themselves from the sun. Cartman insists, "we will not be discriminated against any longer, for we are a great race!" The growing faction, now called "The Ginger Separatist Movement" next protests outside a production of *Annie* because

the lead character is played by a non-redheaded, non-freckled girl. The protesters descend on the actress, tear off her wig, and beat her.

The next scene opens with the movement's inaugural "Ginger Pride Conference." The group has grown significantly in size, appearing to fill a hotel conference room. Cartman greets the excited crowd, asking, "can I get a 'red power'?" The audience echoes the phrase back. He asserts that he's learned the only way to fight hate, is with more hate: "We are not the freaks of society, everyone else is! Gingers are the chosen people, the chosen race. We must view the rest of the world as the lowlife, dark skinned rats that they are." He continues:

My fellow gingers, I envision a world in which there is no hate. A world where everyone is ginger! And so, we must gather together every child who is not ginger and exterminate them! Now go, go out into the night and take non-ginger kids from their homes! We will eradicate them all with cages and torches and a pit of lava to throw them all in! I am not going to live my life as a goddamned minority! Are you with me?

Cartman's claim that he does not want to live his life as a "goddamned minority" is perhaps the real cultural fear that the episode tapped into, and the reason why it became so popular. The ginger crowd responds, "huzzah! Huzzah!" Meanwhile, Kyle, Stan, and Kenny want to change Cartman back to a non-freckled brunette because the plan has backfired. As they walk to Cartman's house, Stan reveals that he has secretly held his own prejudices against gingers, but he now realizes it was wrong. In *South Park's* glib style, he shares the moral of the episode: "everyone is different in one way or another, and we shouldn't be threatened by those differences." However, en route to Cartman's house, the boys encounter several groups of ginger separatists who corner them. A montage of non-ginger kids getting attacked by groups of gingers begins. Horror tropes continue with one boy seeing the ginger kids in the mirror as he brushes his teeth, a ginger girl in a nightgown approaching a house and singing an increasingly aggressive

lullaby, and another boy pulling back the shower curtain to reveal three ginger kids ready to pounce.

As the story shifts back to Cartman, the conference room has transformed into a version of hell. Non-gingers are in cages all around the room, hovering over a lava pit. Cartman is dressed in white robes and carries a staff. The crowd of gingers carries torches. Cartman calls for the extermination to begin with “the daywalker,” Kyle. To both stop Cartman from killing him and allow him to save face in front of the crowd, Kyle whispers his confession that he, Stan, and Kenny changed Cartman into a ginger. Cartman has a quick “change of heart.” He announces to the blood-hungry crowd that,

If we exterminate everyone that isn't ginger, then we are no better than they were for thinking less of us. Maybe we all have to learn to live together...I've learned that we can't judge people based on what they look like.

After some cajoling of the audience, Cartman leads them in song: “Hand and hand we can live together, ginger or not, we're all the same. Black or white, brown or red. We shouldn't kill each other, because it's lame.”

In their commentary on the episode, Matt Stone and Trey Parker share that they came up with the idea for the “Ginger Kids” episode after seeing a billboard in England that featured a little red haired girl, with a caption something along the lines of “only you can prevent ginger,” and they thought it was “so cool! So horrible.” Parker shares that he himself, is “gingerphobic,” and that he “has nothing against them, but they kind of freak me out.” In fact, he claims he once broke up with a girlfriend because he met her mother and she was ginger, and the potential of having redheaded children was enough to end the relationship. Stone says that in England there is a movement for redheads to get racial minority status. “They're like, ‘we're a race,’ and they kind of are, if you think about it. They kind of are. But there is...we did a lot of research about



this. The redhead gene has spread across the whole world.<sup>86</sup> Parker and Stone chose this group of people for the allegorical episode not because gingeriness was an uncomplicated signifier of “difference,” but because they were already familiar with English discourses of joking and bullying. Therefore, the ginger is definitely not an arbitrary figure, as some other scholars have suggested.<sup>87</sup>

#### 2.4.1 Oral history recollections of the “Ginger Kids” episode

During my oral history interviews, many people brought up the “Ginger Kids” *South Park* episode. Most of these people were from the US; people from Europe were largely unfamiliar with the episode. Men who were in high school during the initial airing of the episode generally remembered it negatively. For example, Andy Haverkamp who grew up in rural Kansas said:

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<sup>86</sup> ““Creator Commentary, Ginger Kids,”” n.d., <http://southpark.cc.com/clips/frshlr/creator-commentary-ginger-kids>. In the episode commentary Parker and Stone share that they were in England doing press for *South Park* when they saw this billboard, but do not give the date they were there. I was unable to find evidence of this billboard. It is reminiscent, however, of a popular meme that reads “It Could Happen to It Could Happen to You. Ginger Kids: Help Find a Cure,” and features a picture of a young red-haired girl. See the image here: <https://9gag.com/gag/6673854/ginger-kids-help-find-a-cure>. Additionally, anti-ginger sentiment in British advertisements has been popular over the last nearly two decades. Prominent examples include a 2000 print advertisement for an energy company featuring a photograph of a red haired family and the text, “there are some things in life you can’t choose,” (Ibid.), a newspaper ad for the 2009 reality show *Dating in the Dark* that asked “how do you spot a ginger in the dark?” (“Redheads Riled by Adverts,” *BBC News*, April 16, 2000, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/715863.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/715863.stm)), and a 2016 Match.com subway poster with a picture of a woman with red hair and freckles that read, “If you don’t like your imperfections, someone else will” (Martin Hickman, “Branson’s ‘Anti-Ginger’ Ad Is Banned by Watchdog,” *The Independent*, December 16, 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/advertising/bransons-anti-ginger-ad-is-banned-by-watchdog-1841978.html>).

<sup>87</sup> Brian Creech, “Refugee Status: Tracing the Global Flows of M.I.A.,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 7 (2014): 277-80; Lars Eckstein, “M.I.A.’s ‘Born Free’ and the Ambivalent Politics of Authenticity and Provocation,” *Hard Times* 88, no. 2 (2010): 34-7.

Oh, coppertop, ginger, the whole “don’t have souls” thing was popular. I was born in ’88 so *South Park* was right around high school. It’s you know, just like “stupid ginger,” all those little things that everyone else thinks is kind of cheeky fun, but I don’t know, it kind of grates on you. And then even past that, [there’s] the inability to go enjoy the pool like other kids. The need to wear clothes while in the pool, the need to just not go outside. Just looking different than everyone else.<sup>88</sup>

Andy’s experience of not being able to enjoy outdoor activities or having to wear clothes in the pool to avoid sunburn made him acutely aware that his social difference was both embodied and negative. Such feelings of difference were also closely tied to feelings of not inhabiting norms of dominant masculinity. As he commented later, he felt being ginger was in some ways a difficult identity for cis-straight men: “you can’t be like the tough outdoorsy hiker type, I’ve tried it, it’s sunburn-city! Like, you just can’t do the macho thing, it just doesn’t work.” As previously mentioned, in the 1960s, “ginger” was used as a gay slur.<sup>89</sup> Not being able to participate in stereotypical masculine activities, such outdoor sports, leads to others questioning the ginger man’s “manliness,” which leads to his being labeled as gay.

Dillon Johnson (from Massachusetts) was also in high school when the episode aired. He recalled:

I’m pretty sure right around the time *South Park* aired their episode where they first started with the ginger stuff I was in high school then. Seemingly the next day, everybody in school was [calling me ginger]. I don’t even think I was aware of the word or what it was until everybody at school started rolling off the *South Park* language and throwing it at me. At first I didn’t know what it was because I hadn’t see the episode yet and then I saw it, ahh man. I’m still a fan of the show, I still watch it. But it definitely irritated me...in an ideal world, I’d just rather be called “redhead.”<sup>90</sup>

Prior to the episode, like many other Americans, Dillon had not even heard of the word ginger, but, as he explained, it quickly became a running joke. The *South Park* episode

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<sup>88</sup> Andy Haverkamp, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>89</sup> “ginger, n. and adj.1,” OED Online.

<sup>90</sup> Katie and Kelsey, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

represented the beginning of the “ginger phenomenon” for many people in the United States. Redheads like Dillon knew that having red hair was recognized by others as a difference, albeit a minor one. With the increasing popularity of the term “ginger,” however, the difference was amplified.

Rhonda, who was in her mid-thirties and living in Oregon at the time of the episode, had a similar experience, in that:

I never was really called ginger until after the *South Park* thing and then now it seems to be I’m the “ginger friend” before I was just “the favorite redhead” so I do think that *South Park* episode kind of brought that name.<sup>91</sup>

Although *South Park* did not invent the term ginger, it can be credited with its uptake in popularity in the United States post-2005. Krista Harmon, who was also in her mid-thirties and lives in Oregon said:

I feel like this whole “ginger,” “evil ginger” thing is really funny. That thing on *South Park*, I don’t really watch it. I think it’s...I don’t know what to think about that, actually. People with red hair being unique seems a little more prominent. When I was younger it was just more like, you’re different and we’re gonna tease you about that. Whereas now, it’s sort of a culture. It’s becoming more of a culture.<sup>92</sup>

Like Andy, Dillon, and Rhonda’s, Krista’s comments represent the crystallization of the ginger phenomenon. By “culture,” Krista meant that there are specific characteristics associated with gingeriness, as opposed to the generalized feelings of “difference” she experienced when labeled a redhead as a child. Gingers are now recognized as a specific type of person. As discussed above, negative attitudes towards redheads have existed since biblical times, yet, with the ginger phenomenon, we see something new in its specificity.

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<sup>91</sup> Rhonda Young Wood, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>92</sup> Krista Harmon, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

Katie and Kelsey, friends who attended the Portland Redhead Event together, met in college in Oregon. They bonded over having red hair and believe it is one reason why they became close friends. The “Ginger Kids” episode of *South Park* was particularly important to their friendship. In contrast to the men (Andy and Dillon) who were quoted above, Katie and Kelsey found the episode hilarious.

Katie: We have another [friend] who makes fun of redheads [laughter] and so he would call us gingers and I’d never heard that term before. I was like “ginger,” what? Why are you calling me that?” I didn’t find it offensive or anything. And then he told us there was an episode of *South Park* about gingers and so the two of us got together with our other redheaded friend, and the three of us just sat on his couch and watched the *South Park* “Ginger Kids” episode, which is hilarious. Then we actually [laughter], from there, we proceeded to [laughter] prank our non-ginger friend.

He was gone and so we took all these pictures of the three of us redheads around campus and [reenacting] some scenes from the *South Park* episode, like of us like holding baseball bats in a threatening manner [laughter]. And we put them all up in his room, and we changed the background on his computer to be the scene where there’s a brunette *South Park* character laying in bed and three gingers peering in through the window [laughter] we changed it to that and we also made tee-shirts of pictures of us.

Kelsey: Oh, and we got him red hair dye.

Katie: Yes. Put that on his desk. And we put his tee-shirt like in his drawer, so he’d open it up later and find it.<sup>93</sup>

In what is perhaps a gendered difference, Katie and Kelsey fully embraced the “Ginger Kids” episode – to a more extreme degree than anyone else I interviewed. Additionally, Katie and Kelsey were in college versus high school when they became familiar with the episode, which is likely a less vulnerable social environment for bullying. Likewise, they had the support of each other, and another redhead friend, so they did not feel isolated in the same way that Andy and Dillon, one of only a few redheaded people in their grades, did.

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<sup>93</sup> Katie and Kelsey, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

Eva, who grew up on the West Coast of the US in the late 1970s and early 1980s also found the episode amusing and enjoys joking about it with her friends even a decade after its premiere:

I found the *South Park* episode about gingers SO funny. Gingervitis. Did you see that? It was the best thing in life. Did you like it? It's FUNNY. I'm not a daywalker, I have a soul. But I bought a Kia Soul, so of course my friends are all like "oh the ginger gets another soul." I was like mmhmmm.<sup>94</sup>

Again, Eva's age and gender likely contribute to her positive reaction to the episode.

Both Rhonda and Lindsay, a senior in high school at the time living in New Mexico, explained that they were not personally offended by the episode, but they worried what message it would send to children. For example, Rhonda stated:

I think I took it for what it was, it's *South Park*, they make fun of everyone, and I don't particularly feel slighted or attacked, I think it was kind of humorous, but I've always had a good, positive experience in my life, so it would be easy for me to laugh that off and not take it too serious. I could understand for somebody that maybe was bullied or picked on, how that might really hurt them, or be sensitive to them, so I can understand both sides of that.

Lindsay similarly explained:

I think *South Park* did a whole thing of basically mocking gingers and, I do wonder...I was old enough of course that I just kind of laughed about it. But who knows how that influences what younger kids think, of showing these parents that regretted having redheaded children and things like that. Like oh my god, how did we possibly get stuck with these kids? I don't know. I don't know if the media portrayals have gotten better or worse for gingers, the ones that do get picked on.<sup>95</sup>

Lindsay and Rhonda's reactions identify another important factor as to whether someone would respond negatively to a purportedly satirical representation. If a person had previously felt victimized and bullied for their appearance, then of course this episode would not be interpreted

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<sup>94</sup> Eva Kenworthy, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>95</sup> Lindsay Chandler, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

in the same way as it would for someone who had not had this experiences. The satirical intention may be lost in this instance.

#### **2.4.2 Mediated reactions to “Ginger Kids”**

Surprisingly, there was hardly any mainstream media commentary about the “Ginger Kids” episode immediately following its release in November 2005. References to the episode began within the following year on personal blogs and on message-thread formatted sites.<sup>96</sup> The earliest documented use of the term “ginger kids” by a personal blogger was in August 2006, nine months after the episode aired, on Hiroshi Ryan’s blog, *The Truth is in the Details*. The author participated in a popular online activity of sharing 100 facts about himself. Fact 97 was that after seeing the *South Park* episode, he “feared ginger kids” and “point[s] them out” whenever he sees “them.”<sup>97</sup> In another early documented online interaction from December 2006, blogger “All About Jimbo” used the term to describe his friends and jokingly asserted that “What Cartmann [sic] says is true,” inspiring back and forth joking from said friends in that entry’s comments section.<sup>98</sup> Within this same time frame, the episode was also referenced on message-thread sites about a variety of topics seemingly unrelated to *South Park* or red hair. Importantly, however, these sites are mostly about topics and hobbies traditionally associated with masculinity. For example, on February 26, 2006, a user on the *VW Vortex: The Volkswagon Enthusiast Website*,

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<sup>96</sup> It is important to acknowledge here that many of these kinds of sites are now defunct, so there may have been additional ones I cannot analyze here, writing about this topic twelve years after its inception.

<sup>97</sup> Hiroshi Ryan, “100 Things -- The Conclusion,” *The Truth Is in the Details*, August 10, 2006, <http://www.hiroshiry.com/2006/08/100-things-conclusion-76-100.html>.

<sup>98</sup> “Attack of the Ginger Kid Bloggers,” *All About Jimbo*, December 12, 2006, [http://www.jimbo.info/weblog/archives/2006/12/attack\\_of\\_the\\_g.html](http://www.jimbo.info/weblog/archives/2006/12/attack_of_the_g.html).

started a thread called “Lucaq’s new game: Ginger spotting.”<sup>99</sup> In the post, he proposes a game for other members of the community:

Sign up by posting here, I will add your name and score to this top level thread in a list. You score points by taking pictures of “Ginger’s” [sic] with your camera phone or digital camera and posting them in this tread [sic]. It would be quite easy to cheat so we are goign [sic] to have to be honest here, if you join in, you are certifying that you will not cheat. No post dated pics are allowed, I will be checking some of the links to pics. Pics must be taken by you, from this date going forward [sic] in time.

Lucaq goes on to offer two disclaimers. The first is advice: “When in public i [sic] usually call gingers by the spanish [sic] word (‘El Jengibre’ pronounced ‘hen-heeb-rey’) so that I don’t get punched for pointing and calling someone a ginger to their face.” The second disclaimer contradictorily reads: “And just so VWVortex does not think that I am perpetuating ethnic hatred or racism this is not slang, it is an accepted word for people with red hair and light skin.” Again, identifying and labeling redheads as different is framed in terms of racism or ethnic prejudice, though here the author purports not to be doing that.

The thread contains sixty-seven responses to Lucaq’s prompt. Out of these, the majority of the posts participate in the challenge, support the original idea, or offer additional ginger jokes or commentary. There are only five posts that respond negatively to Lucaq, and two of these are from a woman member of the community towards whom he makes sexualized comments. In response to one redheaded commenter who disagreed with what Lucaq was doing (“this is not \*\*\*\* funny), Lucaq replied, “I’m not talking trash to gingers... 🍺 [beer mug emoticon implying “cheers”] to anyone with red hair, i’ve [sic] just had fun observing them since they are fairly rare

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<sup>99</sup> “Lucaq’s New Game: Ginger Spotting,” *VW Vortex: The Volkswagon Enthusiast Website*, February 26, 2006, <http://forums.vwvortex.com/showthread.php?2469886-Lucaq-s-new-game-Ginger-spotting>.

after watching the South Park where they dyed Cartman to be a ginger... it was GREAT,” and linked to the “Ginger Kids” Wikipedia page, also labeling that “great.”<sup>100</sup>

In addition to the thread from VWVortex, conversations negatively invoking “ginger kids” also took place from 2005-2006 on video game message board sites such as *BF2S Forums* (a site devoted to conversation about Battlefield Two) and *Celestial Heavens*, more general tech and geek news sites thread, like *GPrime*, *Newsground*, and *Digital Spy*, all the way to the white supremacist site *Stormfront*, wherein the original poster wonders which “sub-race” is most predisposed to freckles.<sup>101</sup> In this way, the ginger phenomenon was inextricably linked to both whiteness and masculinity from its earliest inception in the United States. In many of the examples described above, people begin linking to pictures of famous redheads and images from the *South Park* episode, reflecting the racio-visual logic of new media. Such examples show the initial stages of the ginger’s online memeification.

## 2.5 EARLY MEMEFICATION OF THE GINGER

Limor Shifman defines an internet meme as, “(a) a *group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created *with awareness of each other*; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*.”<sup>102</sup> In

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<sup>100</sup> “Ginger Kids,” *Wikipedia*, March 27, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ginger\\_Kids](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ginger_Kids).

<sup>101</sup> “LOL Ginger Kids!!!!,” *BS2S Forums*, November, 2006, <https://forums.bf2s.com//viewtopic.php?id=47863>; “Heroes V of Might and Magic: Hammers of Fate,” *Celestial Heavens*, October 17, 2006, [http://www.celestialheavens.com/show\\_big\\_potd.php?id=221](http://www.celestialheavens.com/show_big_potd.php?id=221); “Against People with Red Hair,” *G-Prime*, January 31, 2006, <http://gprime.net/board/showthread.php?t=5704>; “I Shaved My Head,” *Newsgrounds*, January 21, 2006, <http://www.newsgrounds.com/bbs/topic/418615/>; “Discrimination Against Ginger Hair,” *Digital Spy*, October 28, 2006; “Freckles - Celtic Gene,” *Stormfront*, December 23, 2005, <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t257202/>.

<sup>102</sup> Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 7-8.



popular culture, the term meme has sometimes come to mean an individual image macro (or picture with overlaid text) that is shared online. In this dissertation, however, I use this Shifman's definition, to call attention to the larger construction of the ginger across multiple threads of discourse and technological platforms.

Further developing the meme, British mainstream news media picked up on the concept of "gingerism" in 2007. Several major news sources covered a story about a redheaded English family who had moved out of their home twice to try to escape bullying, and was contemplating doing so a third time. When Paul Sims of the *Daily Mail* first reported on the story on June 1, 2007, he stated that, "A family are being forced out of their home by a gang of thugs because of their red hair." The harassment the family endured included broken windows, verbal assaults, physical attacks, and the words "ginger is gay" painted on their third residence.<sup>103</sup> The father of the family, Kevin Chapman, shared that his 11-year-old son had attempted suicide because of the abuse. A report from *BBC News* the following day stated that the Northumbria police had investigated each incident and the Newcastle City Council was discussing how to proceed. On June 5, 2007, *The Telegraph* published another article on the family in which Chapman alleged that a Newcastle City Council official had suggested that the children should dye their hair "to take the pressure off." The Council denied this statement.<sup>104</sup>

Four days after reporting on the initial events, *BBC News* released a follow up article with the headline, "Is Gingerism as Bad as Racism?" comparing red haired prejudice to racism for an

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<sup>103</sup> The father also said that some of the abuse was about not having brand name clothes and shoes, which implies that some of the bullying may have been based on class status, as well.

<sup>104</sup> Laura Clout, "Bullied for Being Ginger? Try Hair Dye," *Telegraph* June 5, 2007, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1553643/Bullied-for-being-ginger-Try-hair-dye.html>.

international audience.<sup>105</sup> The word “gingerism” was sporadically used in British context in the early 2000s, but not until this *BBC* article did it become a widely used term.<sup>106</sup> The article, which discussed the Chapmans’ situation in the broader context of historical red hair prejudice, went viral. The article explicitly frames the idea of redheaded prejudice as racism. However, this articulation already existed for some people, as seen in Lucaq’s disclaimer that he was “not perpetuating ethnic hatred or racism” with his ginger-spotting game. Additionally, as previously discussed, the *South Park* episode also made this connection because the show was presented as an allegory of racism or ethnic prejudice. By identifying this history, I do not wish to legitimize the claim that gingerism is like racism in any way. Rather, I think it is important to show how these connections were made through various mass and social media to push back against the idea that the interpretation of gingerism as a racial issue is solely a product of white people’s racial anxiety. Though that certainly plays into the phenomenon, the media influences described above also explicitly framed gingerism as a racial issue. These themes will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

### 2.5.1 Kick a Ginger Day

Wider coverage of both the idea of “gingerism” and the *South Park* “Ginger Kids” episode began in 2008, following the first “National Kick a Ginger Day” event in Canada. On November 20,

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<sup>105</sup> Finlo Rohrer, “Is Gingerism as Bad as Racism?,” *BBC News Magazine*, June 6, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6725653.stm>.

<sup>106</sup> For example, it was used to talk about the prejudice Mick Hucknall faced in: “Bo Selecta! Series 2, Channel 4,” *The Custard TV*, July 25, 2003, <http://www.thecustardtv.com/2008/01/bears-tail-channel-4.html>. It was also used in this reporter's blog, but in the context of being inflicted with "gingerism," akin to *South Park's* use of the term gingervitis, rather than to describe prejudice: Vic McGlynn, “Vic’s Blog,” *BBC*, October 5, 2005, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/6music/events/readingfestival/vic\\_blog.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/6music/events/readingfestival/vic_blog.shtml).

2008, students at schools across Canada were kicked and harassed. Students reported being beaten and sustaining upper body bruising, as well as being kicked in the shins and groin.<sup>108</sup> One victim, thirteen-year-old Aaron Mishkin, estimated he was kicked about 80 times.<sup>109</sup> He stated, “Kick a Ginger Day was used as an excuse to do violence on other people, and to hurt them for your own enjoyment.” A parent interviewed by the *Calgary Herald* considered suing *South Park* because of the injuries his son sustained.<sup>110</sup> The incidents were organized through a Facebook group called “National Kick a Ginger Day,” which at the time of press covering the incident, had 4,700 members.<sup>111</sup> The site, discovered to have been administered by a fourteen-year-old boy from Courtenay, on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, was quickly taken down. The boy argued that he did not create the page and had only recently taken over administrative power, after its original creator got in trouble.<sup>112</sup> The *Edmonton Journal* anonymously quoted him stating, “it was a joke” and “I’ll message everybody and say I’m sorry this offended people.” He was investigated on the basis of inciting hate, though in the end he was not charged with any crime.<sup>113</sup> School administrations widely condemned the incident, in one case calling it,

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<sup>108</sup> “Assault on Red-Haired Student Investigated as Hate Crime,” *CBC News*, November 21, 2008, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/assault-on-red-haired-student-investigated-as-hate-crime-1.704812>., “Assault on Red-Haired Student Investigated as Hate Crime,” *CBC News*, November 21, 2008, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/assault-on-red-haired-student-investigated-as-hate-crime-1.704812>.

<sup>109</sup> “‘Kick a Ginger’ Tumult Shows Anti-Bullying Effort Not Working: Teacher,” *CBC News*, November 23, 2008, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/kick-a-ginger-tumult-shows-anti-bullying-effort-not-working-teacher-1.765777>.

<sup>110</sup> “‘Kick a Ginger’ Catches Schools ‘Off Guard,’” *The Calgary Herald*, November 23, 2005, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100329095008/http://www.canada.com:80/calgaryherald/news/city/story.html?id=1656d500-3b6f-4e52-9cfc-223242dc1829>.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Catherin Rolfsen, “Teen Behind ‘Kick a Readhead’ Day Apologizes for Joke; Facebook Group Promoting the Campaign Had 5,000 Members,” *The Vancouver Sun*, November 21, 2008, A7.

<sup>113</sup> Darcy Wintonyk, “‘Kick a Ginger’ Day Has Redheads Running Scared,” *CTV News Vancouver*, November 20, 2008, <http://bc.ctvnews.ca/kick-a-ginger-day-has-redheads-running->

“disgusting and ridiculous.”<sup>114</sup> Their responses and punishments for students at individual schools were varied and included suspension, police involvement, restricting in-school access to social media, and initiating conversations about anti-bullying, skin color prejudice, hair color prejudice, and racism.

Blogs and forums also discussed Kick a Ginger Day soon after the incident took place. Pop culture blogger “Cult Potato” commented on the humorously ironic aspects of the situation: that the event took place during Canada’s anti-bullying week and that only 365 people had joined a Facebook group meant to combat the original page, which had 4,700 members.<sup>115</sup> User “Valteron” on the Q&A site “The Straight Dope” asked, three days following the incident, “Are ginger kids the new oppressed minority?” The question received 48 responses, in which the majority of commenters are confused by and concerned about the event.<sup>116</sup> In fact, almost all popular blog reporting of Kick a Ginger Day condemned the event.<sup>117</sup> However, in comments on these blogs, people still make derogatory comments. For example, in response to blogger Ramblings of a Fangirl’s post about being horrified over these events, yet still proud of her red hair color, a commenter wrote: “you ugly and fat ginger.”<sup>118</sup> Nonetheless, there was an overall

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scared-1.344620; Canwest News Service, “Teen Urging Others to Kick Redheads Won’t Be Charged,” *The Vancouver Province*, November 25, 2008, A9.

<sup>114</sup> Matthew Moore, “Facebook ‘Kick a Ginger’ Campaign Prompts Attacks on Redheads,” *The Telegraph*, November 22, 2008,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/canada/3498766/Facebook-Kick-a-Ginger-campaign-prompts-attacks-on-redheads.html>.

<sup>115</sup> CK, “National Kick a Ginger Day,” *Cult Potato*, 2008,

<http://cultpotato.blogspot.com/2008/11/national-kick-ginger-day.html>.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> See, for example: “Are Ginger Kids the New Oppressed Minority?,” *The Straight Dope*, 2008, <http://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/showthread.php?t=494371>.

<sup>118</sup> Amber McNaught, “National Kick a Ginger Day: Yet More Proof That Stupidity Should Be Painful,” *Forever Amber*, 2008, <http://www.foreveramber.co.uk/2008/11/national-kick-a-ginger-day-yet-more-proof-that-stupidity-should-be-painful.html>; “Kick/Punch a Ginger’ WHAT?!?!?!” *Ramblings of a Fangirl*, 2008, <http://ramblingfangirl.blogspot.com/2008/11/s-you-may-know-i-am-ginger.html>; Scott Thomas Kimler, “Ginger Blue Raccoon,” *Our Adventure*

shift in attitude from viewing gingers as a group that socially acceptable to tease, to being shocked and saddened by physical violence towards them. Importantly, the blogs and forums described in this section are not so closely associated with masculinity as those commenting upon the 2005 episode were. In fact, several of these blog posts appear to have been written by women, some of whom are redheads themselves. Thus by this point, the ginger meme began expanding throughout the wider internet community.

Stephen Groening has argued that *South Park* reflects a cultural “micropolitics of identity” in which everyone desires the label of “oppressed,” often through reclaiming histories of discrimination, or even claiming reverse prejudices.<sup>119</sup> For example, Groening cites complaints against affirmative action as indicative of this sensibility.<sup>120</sup> The “micro” aspect refers to the fact that *South Park* allows people to use *any* part of their identity to claim oppression, because through its logic that “everyone is oppressed but no one oppresses,” it flattens social differences and obscures power hierarchies.<sup>121</sup> This idea reflects the post-racial discourses popular during the initial *South Park* airing. Other scholars, such as Austin Sarat, however, use the term “micropolitics of identity” less negatively, to describe how we recognize and accommodate (or not) differences, broadly defined, in everyday life.<sup>122</sup> Sarat’s understanding of “micro” refers to local and interpersonal interactions, but the categories of social difference he uses the term to describe are established ones, such as nationality, religion, and sexuality, rather than something like hair color.

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*Pages*, 2008; “No Gingers Allowed!,” *Itsbashy’s Weblog*, 2008; Ginger Liu, “Zero Tolerance for Kick a Ginger Day,” *Ginger Liu*, 2008.

<sup>119</sup> “‘Kick/Punch a Ginger’ WHAT?!?!?!”

<sup>120</sup> Groening, “Cynicism and Other Postideological Half Measures in *South Park*,” 114.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

None of my interviewees were personally victims of Kick a Ginger Day, but those who were in middle or high school during the time of the first occurrence were familiar with it. Dan Wallace, who was a junior at a high school in Massachusetts in 2005 remembers that, “going into school, people would say you were going to get your ass kicked because you had red hair.”<sup>123</sup> Maryellen was in middle school for the first round of Kick a Ginger Day, also in Massachusetts. She recalls: “a couple people in class were talking about these pages on Facebook, and there was this one phenomenon, National Kick-a-Ginger Day, which I thought was, admittedly, kind of funny.”<sup>124</sup> Luke was in secondary school in Peterborough, UK. He knew of Kick a Ginger Day, but had never been kicked. He was quick to point out, as was Maryellen, that events like “Hug a Ginger Day” also exist, as an effort to push back against ginger bullying.<sup>125</sup>

The varied impressions of and reactions to the first Kick a Ginger Day are reflective of what Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner term the “ambivalent internet.” The term describes the immense polysemy online that results from the “vast constellations of participants and perspectives constituting digital media.”<sup>126</sup> Kick a Ginger Day exemplifies the qualities of this condition, as described by Phillips and Milner:

Simultaneously antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed ... [there are] countless...examples that permeate contemporary online participation, [that] are too unwieldy, too variable across specific cases, to be essentialized as *this* opposite *that*. Nor can they be pinned to one singular purpose. Because they are not singular; they inhabit, instead, a full spectrum of purposes – all depending on who is participating, who is observing, and what set of assumptions each person brings to a given interaction” (10).<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Dan Wallace, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Winthrop, MA, July 9, 2016.

<sup>124</sup> Maryellen Kilcullen, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, via Skype in Amherst, MA and Pittsburgh, PA, March 22, 2015.

<sup>125</sup> Luke Garratt, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Oxford, UK, August 7, 2015.

<sup>126</sup> Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), 12.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

One particularly relevant effect of the ambivalent internet for this project is the concept of “Poe’s Law.” The concept suggests that within the current online environment, it is impossible to distinguish between sincere extremism (ie. bigotry) and satirical extremism.<sup>128</sup> With Kick a Ginger Day, therefore, it is not a useful endeavor to attempt to determine whether the creator of the group meant in earnest to encourage violence, whether the children who participated actually were expressing hate for those they targeted, or whether the whole thing was a joke that got taken too far. For Shifman, this particular type of ambivalence is due to an unclear “stance” on behalf of a specific meme. Shifman uses the term stance to describe how an internet user positions her or himself in relation to a meme, whether it is a particular text manifestation of that meme, the linguistic codes it uses, or as one of its addressees.<sup>129</sup> Differences across a variety of social categories influenced stance with regard to the ginger meme. Of particular importance is of course age, because of the youth-centered aspect of this incident. In comments on articles about the attacks, parents lamented over children’s inability to make rational decisions and their propensity to be swayed by social media.

Another important factor is geographical location and related cultural norms. The event circulated on Facebook which has the feature of being geographically unbound (with some exceptions. For example, Facebook is blocked in China and has previously been blocked in countries such as Turkey and Iran, following protests). Additionally, the event was preceded by the *South Park* episode which shares an international audience through syndication. The episode itself was admittedly inspired by an already circulating public perception in the UK, with which Parker and Stone, as Americans, were previously unfamiliar. The geographical reach and subsequent loss of cultural specificity, when combined with simultaneous amplification of

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 78-9.

<sup>129</sup> Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 40.

stereotypes surrounding redheads, resulted in the explosion of the ginger meme. The ginger meme itself is exemplary of Milner's take on memes as a type of "lingua franca" for those engaged in digital participation, or "a common tongue allowing geographically dispersed participants to connect and share."<sup>130</sup>

Phillips and Milner suggest that "ambivalence collapses and complicates binaries" and that studying ambivalence "can shine a light on the tangled, messy binary breakdown both precipitating and resulting from everyday expression." Such studies can call attention to issues related to power, for example, by asking, who is being alienated, marginalized, or mocked?<sup>131</sup> In this case whiteness itself is mocked and made strange, but the material effects of its marginalization are limited. Phillips and Milner further state that, "the same behaviors that can wound can be harnessed for social justice," which holds true for Kick a Ginger Day.<sup>132</sup> While the event did put a particular group of people at risk for bullying and physical violence, it also made obvious the constructed nature of whiteness and the arbitrariness of physical features that designate a person as white.

## 2.6 CONCLUSION

Red hair has been an Othered characteristic since ancient times. However, the rationale for seeing people with red hair as socially different has shifted across both geographical and historical settings. In ancient cultures, red hair both was something to be feared and something to laugh at, depending on which group was in power. Biblically, red hair was gendered and for

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<sup>130</sup> Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 7.

<sup>131</sup> Phillips and Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet*, 13.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



women it represented lasciviousness, while for men, untrustworthiness. Untrustworthiness coded through red hair became a Jewish characteristic, taken up in art and theater from the Roman empire through the mid–nineteenth century. Early film and television colorization technologies reinforced redheadedness as a visible social difference and created prototypes for the gendered divisions of the ginger meme today. For narrators growing up in the US and Western Europe in the 1970s and before, red hair, light skin, and freckles was a combination of physical characteristics that led to unwanted, typically negative, attention from peers and sometimes adults.

When the *South Park* “Ginger Kids” episode premiered in 2005, it brought a new version of a redheaded stereotype into the public consciousness. The visual aesthetic of the so-called ginger kids (and *South Park* as a whole) fit with the “internet ugly” aesthetic, a trend that privileges the “ugliness” of amateur content on the web and is intertwined with trolling culture.<sup>133</sup> Therefore, the visual beginnings of the ginger meme fit well in the growing terrain of new media. Reflecting the current cultural moment, red-haired people are no longer scapegoats for anxieties about evilness and a fear of God’s wrath, but rather, they have become scapegoats for anxieties about whiteness and loss of social stature.

The ginger phenomenon as it exists today effectively began in the United States in 2005 with the *South Park* episode, “Ginger Kids.” Within the following two years, mainstream British press began to identify and label the issue of “gingerism.” The term started to spread through social media, but it was not until 2008, when “National Kick a Ginger Day” took place Canada, that coverage became widespread. By 2008, the “ginger” had become a recognizable figure within Anglo-American communities that represented some particularly undesirable aspects of

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<sup>133</sup> Nick Douglas, “It’s Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 315.

stereotypical whiteness. In the next chapter, I will introduce the first of three major discourses that combine to create the Othering of the ginger through new media: gender.

### 3.0 GENDERED GINGERS

As I have argued, the ginger phenomenon uses red-haired, light skinned, freckled people as scapegoats for the negative aspects of whiteness. Importantly, however, the phenomenon does not use the ginger as a scapegoat for *all* negative aspects of whiteness, rather only those parts of whiteness which make it vulnerable, or the aspects of it which undermine its power. For example, the ginger phenomenon critiques the perceived weakness and nerdiness of white men; it does not critique the violence or history of imperialism associated with them. The simultaneous effeminization and desexualization of the ginger man is thus central to his construction. Redheaded women, as I will show are subjected to both hypersexualization and desexualization, as they are alternately ascribed with the forms of both “redhead” and “ginger.”

In what follows, I will summarize the literature on hegemonic masculinity, and the ways in which white nerd masculinities are both hegemonic and subordinated. Next I will review the literature on affects of disgust—one of the central ways in which people react to images and stories about ginger people and their sexualities that circulate online. With these sources of ginger bias established, I move on to consider its manifestations. I will summarize the gendered stereotypes about redheaded people that exist both on and offline, in mediated representations and people’s everyday lives. With the range of stereotypes introduced, I will then analyze how they play out within two image macros from the larger ginger meme: the Redhead Versus Ginger and the Overconfident Ginger. Since many such image macros attempt to be witty, irreverent, satirical I will next consider red hair and its relationship to comedy and humor. In order to illustrate how the above theories interact with the ginger stereotypes, I will consider Conan O’Brien as an example of a redheaded figure who transitioned from the pre-ginger period and embraced the ginger meme. I will conclude by considering two viral ginger texts: the Red Hot

100 campaign, and the Match.com “imperfections” controversy, which were significant on their own and were also addressed by Conan O’Brien as part of his participation in the ginger meme. By the end of the chapter, I hope to have shown how mediated discourses of gender, especially as they circulate online, are fundamental to the construction of the ginger figure.

### 3.1 HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Rather than an innate characteristic possessed by people assigned male at birth, masculinity has been described as “the practices, behaviors, attitudes, sexualities, emotions, positions, bodies, organizations, institutions, and all manner of expectations culturally associated with (though not limited to) people understood to be male.”<sup>1</sup> Other scholars have argued that masculinity is a performance negotiated in interaction, which varies across time periods and cultures.<sup>2</sup> Of particular concern are hegemonic masculinities, which R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt understand as patterns of practice that allow “men’s dominance over women to continue.”<sup>3</sup> Masculinities are multiple and hierarchical. The hierarchy of masculinities is maintained through a pattern of hegemony, not by a unitary dominating force.<sup>4</sup> One way in which a particular type of masculinity remains at the top of the hierarchy is the consistent “the marginalization or delegitimization of alternatives.”<sup>5</sup> The ginger’s masculinity is certainly delegitimized and

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<sup>1</sup> C.J. Pascoe and Tristan Bridges, *Exploring Masculinities: Identity, Inequality, Continuity, and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: James W. Messerschmidt, *Masculinities and Crime: Critique and Reconceptualization of Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), 31; Todd Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” 832.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 846.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

marginalized. However, gingers themselves do not perform or participate in any type of alternative masculinity, but rather, they have been labeled as doing so, based on their physical features, which have symbolic meanings (e.g., weakness) that are incommensurable with the symbolic meanings attached to dominant hegemonic masculinity (e.g., strength) within white Western cultures. People with red hair do not share cultural identities nor sociocultural practices (for the most part), such as those embodying other alternative masculinities, e.g., gay or “emo,” might.

Many men who are socially powerful do not embody ideal hegemonic masculinity, but all men do position themselves in relation to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity.<sup>6</sup> By belonging to the categories of both white and male, ginger men have enormous privilege; they have of course not been subjected to systematic oppression. Rather, their complaints of discrimination are typically about isolated instances of violence, prejudicial treatment in heterosexual relationships, and bullying or teasing (albeit sometimes to a severe degree). Still, they position themselves towards hegemonic masculinity as the ideal. This positioning explains aspects of several of the examples presented below, especially the “Red Hot 100” campaign. While we need not treat relatively privileged men as “objects of pity,” it is important to recognize that attempts to embody hegemonic masculinities do lead to internal conflict and potentially unsatisfying experiences of life.<sup>7</sup> Men are not always positively, nor even neutrally affected by the gendered hierarchy.

Another way in which hegemonic masculinities are maintained is through the “production of exemplars of masculinity,” such as athletes.<sup>8</sup> Such exemplars are praised and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 838.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 852.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 846.

rewarded in many ways by society, such as status and money. Boys growing up in patriarchal cultures look up to them as role models. I argue that a central part of ginger phenomenon is the production of an exemplar of *failed* masculinity, which also works in maintaining this hegemony. To be labeled a ginger is to be stripped of one's masculinity, or blocked from embodying a hegemonic masculinity. The label "ginger" is a policing of the boundaries of white masculinity.

In some ways, this is similar to C.J. Pascoe's work on adolescent boys' use of the word "fag" as a gender regulation that operates in a disciplinary manner. In her study of high school male adolescents, Pascoe argues that the fag discourse is used as a disciplinary mechanism that regulates performances of gender, rather than as a slur against gay men or boys. If boys are seen "failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and strength," they will be termed "fags."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, they engage in these tasks in order to avoid this label. Much like the fag discourse, the ginger discourse is also a way in which "boys [and men] discipline themselves and each other through joking relationships."<sup>10</sup> In fact, words like "gay," "fag," and "cunt" are often used to describe ginger men online. Similar to Pascoe's context, these words are not necessarily used to imply that ginger men are homosexual, but rather that they fail (or are perceived as failing) at traditional performances of masculinity. Aside from changing their physical appearance, however, there is no apparent way that ginger men can avoid their labeling as ginger.

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<sup>9</sup> C.J. Pascoe, "Dude You're a Fag': Adolescent Masculinity and the Fag Discourse," *Sexualities* 8, no. 3 (2005): 330.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3.1.1 White nerd masculinity

Work on white nerd masculinity began in the late 1990s, alongside the growth of critical whiteness studies. Mary Bucholtz defines “nerdiness” as a process, much like masculinity itself: “Nerdiness is not an essence, of course, but a set of practices, engagements, and stances, and individuals oriented to nerdiness to a greater or lesser degree in their actions.”<sup>11</sup> Nerds are stereotyped as having the following qualities: intellect, lack of attention to their appearances, inept social and relational skills, lack of physical or sport ability, small body size, and difficulty initiating or maintaining heterosexual relationships with women.<sup>12</sup> As many scholars have shown, white nerd masculinity is full of contradictions.<sup>13</sup> It is both subordinate and hegemonic, marginalized and oppressive. Like all men, those who identify as or are labeled as (white) nerds must position themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinity.

Though people identified as nerds may face discrimination and bullying, sometimes in severe ways, nerdiness is gendered as masculine, and therefore is not a totally subordinate position.<sup>14</sup> In her study of the early online community BlueSky, Lori Kendall found that men she interviewed used their subordinated status to make fun of hegemonic masculinity, but they were

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Bucholtz, “The Whiteness of Nerds: Superstandard English and Racial Markedness,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11, no. 1 (2001): 87.

<sup>12</sup> Lori Kendall, “Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1999): 264.

<sup>13</sup> Ron Eglash, “Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters,” *Social Text* 71, no. 2 (2002): 50; Lori Kendall, “‘White and Nerdy’: Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 44, no. 3 (2011): 505; Alice E. Marwick, “Scandal or Sex Crime?: Gendered Privacy and the Celebrity Nude Photo Leaks,” *Ethics and Information Technology* 19, no. 3 (2017): 180.

<sup>14</sup> Angela Willey and Banu Subramaniam, “Inside the Social World of Asocials: White Nerd Masculinity, Science, and the Politics of Reverent Disdain,” *Feminist Studies* 43, no. 1 (2017): 24; Lori Kendall, “‘Oh No! I’m a Nerd!’ Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum,” *Gender & Society* 14, no. 2 (2000): 271.

also careful to distance themselves from femininity.<sup>15</sup> In a more extreme version, in their work on the “pickup artist culture” (PUA), Ran Almog and Danny Kaplan analyze how the PUA community targets men who are perceived as nerds, because it is assumed that they face social challenges with regard to dating women. These men are then coached in a misogynistic “logic of gaming” that views women and heterosexual conquests as prizes.<sup>16</sup> Almog and Kaplan situate the PUA community in Michael Kimmel’s larger conception of “guyland,” an imaginary place which is created and fueled by a perceived loss of male privilege.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to being gendered as masculine, nerdiness is racialized as white. In Mary Bucholtz’s work on white nerd youth linguistic practices, she found that nerds used superstandard English to distance themselves from “coolness,” which was signaled via the use of slang appropriated by their white peers from their peers of color.<sup>18</sup> Christine Quail additionally points out that we know that nerds are assumed to be both white and male, because other kinds of nerds, such as “black” or “female” necessitate modifiers.<sup>19</sup> Some things have changed since foundational work on nerd identities was first established in the late 1990s and early 2000s. From the lens of primitivist racism, Ron Eglash noted that within Western cultures, men of African descent were hypersexualized (and cool) and those of Asian descent were hyposexualized (and nerdy); white people, in contrast, represented a “perfect” middle ground.<sup>20</sup> These stereotypes no

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<sup>15</sup> Lori Kendall, “Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1999): 271.

<sup>16</sup> Ran Almog and Danny Kaplan, “The Nerd and His Discontent: The Seduction Community and the Logic of the Game as a Geeky Solution to the Challenges of Young Masculinity,” *Men and Masculinities* 20, no. 1 (2015): 28.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Bucholtz, “The Whiteness of Nerds,” 85; Michael S. Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (New York : Harper, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Christine Quail, “Nerds, Geeks, and the Hip/Square Dialectic in Contemporary Television,” *Television & New Media* 12, no. 5 (2011): 463.

<sup>20</sup> Ron Eglash, “Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters,” *Social Text* 71, no. 2 (2002): 52.



doubt still have social resonance and consequences for men of both African and Asian descent. However, I would suggest that in addition, as white masculinity's stability is increasingly undermined, so too is its perception as sexually "perfectly balance[d]." In 2000, Lori Kendall claimed that, "aspects of nerdiness come to signify whiteness."<sup>21</sup> In our shifting demographics nearly two decades later, I argue that the reverse is also true: aspects of whiteness now signify nerdiness, which is part of the cultural fear the ginger phenomenon reveals. If whiteness constitutes nerdiness, then the cultural perception of white masculinity's heterosexual desirability and competence decreases.

Because nerdiness is deeply entwined with a white, male identity, Angela Willey and Banu Subramaniam point out that the perceived oppression of nerds is problematic:

Nerd masculinity is raced and classed, and an analysis of nerd masculinity as "less masculine" and therefore "progressive" performs an erasure of raced and classed operation of power in the real world. Nerd pride depends upon a willful displacement of notions of white privilege; a containment of negative nerd stereotypes; and a defanging of misogyny that allows for a nerdy subjectivity that is masculine enough, without belying the male privilege through which it is constituted.<sup>22</sup>

Willey and Subramaniam's explanation sheds light into the ways that ginger men, while subordinated in some aspects, still benefit from and reproduce aspects of toxic masculinity and white supremacy. For example, singer Ed Sheeran, character Ron Weasley of the *Harry Potter* series, and talk show host Conan O'Brien, are three popular culture figures whose performances (at times) of toxic masculinity are obscured or excused by their ginger status. For Kendall, one

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<sup>21</sup> Lori Kendall, "'Oh No! I'm a Nerd!' Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum," *Gender & Society* 14, no. 2 (2000): 268.

<sup>22</sup> Angela Willey and Banu Subramaniam, "Inside the Social World of Asocials: White Nerd Masculinity, Science, and the Politics of Reverent Disdain," *Feminist Studies* 43, no. 1 (2017): 25.

way that nerdy white men can enact complicit masculinity is by demonstrating “violent expression of sexual interest in women” which each of the above has done, to varying degrees.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the sometimes insidious ways in which white nerd masculinity reproduces negative effects of dominant masculinity, it does still have some subversive potential.<sup>24</sup> Though nerdy white men sometimes appeal to hegemonic masculinity through negative masculine behaviors, they still embody a masculinity that is overall deferential and physically weak. Because it has subversive potential, the nerd identity is dangerous to the stability of patriarchy. To neutralize this threat, nerd identity has in some ways become incorporated. The most obvious evidence of incorporation is the commodification of “geek culture,” including the sale of clothing, accessories, and media targeted to those who identify as fans of particular avenues of popular culture. As J.W. McArthur summarizes in his work on digital geek subculture, “what was once geek has now become chic.”<sup>25</sup> The borders of hegemonic masculinity have expanded to include geek masculinities (to some extent). However, they cannot extend too far, lest hegemonic masculinity lose its power. Therefore, a boundary is drawn, representing a limit around how far we can stretch masculinity to let it include so-called nerds. The ginger represents the irredeemable qualities of the nerd which remain outside of the boundary.

Willey and Subramaniam have suggested that we are now witnessing the “rise of the nerd” as part of a larger shift in cultural ideas about masculinity.<sup>26</sup> As Connell and Messerschmidt explain, “masculinities are...subject to change. Challenges to hegemony are

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<sup>23</sup> Lori Kendall, “Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1999): 270.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>25</sup> J.A. McArthur, “Digital Subculture: A Geek Meaning of Style,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (2009): 61.

<sup>26</sup> Willey and Subramaniam, “Inside the Social World of Asocials,” 24.

common, and so are adjustments in the face of these challenges.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, it makes sense that masculinity would undergo shifts during this period of social change and demographic re-ordering. Part of the context here, as Lori Kendall explains, is that nerds have been (semi)rehabilitated and incorporated into hegemonic masculinity as a result of ongoing technological growth in Western cultures since the 1980s.<sup>28</sup> During this time, working in the technology industries in an office setting had to be redefined as a masculine and white career path, in contrast to historic ideals of rugged white masculinity. The aforementioned transition from “geek to chic” is also implicated in this process. Instead of being derogatory, the term “geek” now signifies a certain level of expertise, specifically with regards to technological ability.<sup>29</sup> Though geek and nerd have slightly different valences, many people use them interchangeably. These groups can now claim some power and “coolness” through an investment or skill in the technology industries. More broadly, their perceived intelligence can also rehabilitate them if it is seen as valuable for people around them. Within in a knowledge economy, the nerd’s vaunted earning power—a longstanding trait of hegemonic masculinity in the US—has helped moved them from the margins, towards the ideal of dominant masculinity. In other words, nerds’ acceptance into hegemonic masculinity is contingent on their being capitalistically exploitable.

Though the ginger in many ways is consistent with ideas about nerdiness, he lacks the potentially redeeming qualities ascribed to nerds in popular culture: intelligence and technological skill. This is not to say that gingers are stereotyped as unintelligent, or excluded from being technologically capable, but rather that the type of nerdiness they represent does not

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<sup>27</sup> Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” 835.

<sup>28</sup> Kendall, “Nerd Nation,” 261, 265.

<sup>29</sup> McArthur, “Digital Subculture,” 61.

intrinsically include intellectual ability, only all of the other loathsome aspects of the nerd identity. Interestingly, some individual redheads stereotyped themselves as being intelligent in both Druann Heckert and Amy Best's study of the social deviance of red hair, as well as in my own oral history interviews.<sup>30</sup> For example, Karen Olin suspected that she actually avoided bullying as a redhead because the other kids thought, "oh she's too smart for me."<sup>31</sup> Robert Merrill, whose redheaded mother passed away when he was young, shared that his family's memories of her getting a graduate degree in biochemistry, "kind of enforced that whole 'gingers are smarter' stereotype."<sup>32</sup> It is possible these people recognized that intelligence is normally a part of nerdy stereotypes and chose to include it as a compensatory quality of gingeriness, even though in the broader popular culture, intelligence is not a stereotype typically ascribed to gingers.

### 3.2 AFFECTS OF DISGUST

A central part of the ginger man's construction as demasculinized, is that others react to him, and particularly to thoughts of his sexuality, with disgust. Such responses can also apply to ginger women who can likewise be viewed as desexualized, and thus defeminized, as one's worth as a woman is measured largely by sexual attractiveness, but these responses are overall more common towards men. Recent attempts to theorize disgust have been made across the fields of feminism, cultural studies, affect studies, psychoanalysis, and psychology.<sup>33</sup> Across this work

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<sup>30</sup> Druann Maria Heckert and Amy Best, "Ugly Duckling to Swan : Labeling Theory and the Stigmatization of Red Hair," *Symbolic Interaction* 20, no. 4 (1997): 375.

<sup>31</sup> Karen Olin, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Merrill, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, Clark McCauley, Bunmi Olatunji, Dean McKay, "Disgust: The Body and Soul Emotion in the 21st Century," in *Disgust and its*

there has been significant debate over whether or not disgust is a “primary emotion,” or in other words, a universal instinct.<sup>34</sup> Questions arise, then, over what objects or experiences invoke disgust, and whether or not they invoke a “natural” reaction versus one that is symbolically and socially constructed. Certainly given research on the contingency and fleeting nature of beauty standards,<sup>35</sup> I do not believe that the reaction of disgust to ginger people, and particularly men’s appearances, is natural or based in biology. In fact, the very recent proliferation of this particular rendition of the ginger stereotype shows that its construction is a highly symbolic and temporally situated phenomenon. Some people express that their reaction of disgust towards ginger people is because they look sickly. In these cases, people do invoke biological discourses to explain their reactions and thus implicitly argue that their disgust is a primary emotion, though they do not offer scientific research to support these claims. For example, in a 2011 interview with ABC news, twelve-year-old Jonathan Gilsdorf from California described how a classmate would not shake his hand after a sports game, stating, “He started to put his hand out, but then pulled it

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*Disorders: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment Implications*, ed. Bunmi Olatunji (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009), 9-29; Winifred Menninghaus, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003); Martha Nussbaum, *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation & Constitutional Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Daniel Kelly, *Yuck!: The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust*; McGinn, *The Meaning of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Jaak J Panskepp, “Criteria for Basic Emotions. Is DISGUST a Primary ‘Emotion’?,” *Cognition and Emotion* 21, no. 8 (2007): 1819–28. *Cognition and Emotion* 21, no. 8 (2007): 1819-1825.

<sup>35</sup> For example, beauty standards have changed over time and across cultures in terms of things like weight, hair, tanning, plastic surgery techniques, and many other aspects of human appearance: Peter N. Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York University Press, 1997); Kobena Mercer, “Black Hair/Style Politics,” in *Black British Culture and Society*, ed. Kewsi Owusu (London, Routledge, 2000): 111-21; Yvonne Hunt, Erik Auguston, Lila Rutten, Richard Moser, Amy Yaroch, “History and Culture of Tanning in the United States,” in *Shedding Light on Indoor Tanning*, ed. Carolyn Heckman and Sharon Manne (Dordrecht, Netherlands, Springer, 2012): 5-32; Christopher Oldstone-Moore, *Of Beards and Men: The Revealing History of Facial Hair* (University of Chicago Press, 2015); Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful*.

back, saying, ‘ew, a Ginger,’ like I’m some different species. I just wanted to cry.”<sup>36</sup> Though the disgust affect is not associated as often with women, it does happen, such as in 2015, when a redheaded Scottish teenager was barred from boarding a flight because the airline staff thought she was too pale, and thus ill and potentially contagious in the confined space of an airplane.<sup>37</sup>

Outside of the primary emotion debate there have been various other attempts to define disgust. A central way in which disgust has been defined is through both its links with and distinctions from ugliness. Disgust and ugliness are similar in terms of their negative connotations and feelings of displeasure. However, they differ in that disgust is often positioned as an extreme affective aesthetic response to ugliness. Mojca Küplen posits that that which is disgusting is actually precluded from aesthetic inspection; it cannot even register on a scale of beauty.<sup>38</sup> Even more severe than just being considered ugly, ginger men are often excluded from the categories of physical and sexual attractiveness all together because of their interpreted “grossness” or disgustingness. Such themes are often depicted in ginger image macros (memes) as will be discussed later in this chapter. One particularly striking example are pictures (there are several renditions) of a teenage boy with a ginger afro, captioned with the text: “my helmet protects my virginity.” In this example, the joke is that the sexual appeal of the ginger man is not just mocked, it is inaccessible, or non-existent.

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<sup>36</sup> Laura Glaswand, “Ginger Abuse: Tackling Redhead Harassment,” *ABC News*, February 21, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/WhatWouldYouDo/ginger-abuse-witnessed-discrimination-redhead/story?id=12929946>.

<sup>37</sup> David Harding, “Pale, Red-Haired Scotland Girl Not Allowed to Board Plane Because Flight Staff Mistook Her for Being Ill,” *New York Daily News*, July 11, 2015, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/pale-red-haired-scotland-girl-stopped-boarding-flight-article-1.2289082>.

<sup>38</sup> Mojca Küplen, *Beauty, Ugliness, and the Free Play of Imagination: An Approach to Kant’s Aesthetics*, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Press, 2015), 146.

Other scholars theorize disgust through social performances. Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, Clark McCauley, Bunmi Olatunji, and Dean McKay (2009) argue that one defining feature of disgust is its potential for contagion.<sup>39</sup> They suggest that disgust may be universally contagious and that the contagion of disgust may happen mentally (through processes of association), or physically (through material contact with a disgusting object, or with a person who has been in contact with that object).<sup>40</sup> The way in which ginger discourses circulate online may be thought of as a form of contagion; the disgust that accompanies viewing these memes is shared, along with the visual memes themselves. Comments and captions can frame others' interpretation of images of gingers.

Martha Nussbaum further suggests that when someone feels interpersonal disgust towards another person, they respond by ascribing a subhuman nature to that person. Such ascription is a dangerous process and one that might be resolved through interpersonal connection and attempts to understand other people's feelings.<sup>41</sup> Because, as other scholars have argued, that which causes disgust is often socially and symbolically constructed, power relations are important to consider here, in terms of who evokes feelings of disgust and claims them in response to other people. Nussbaum's theory of disgust, for example, comes from her work on attitudes towards gay and lesbian sexual acts. Though the ginger phenomenon is not explicitly about gayness, themes of gender and sexual deviance are important. As James Climenhage argued, central to the redheaded man's construction as different is his gender atypicality.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, Clark McCauley, Bunmi Olatunji, and Dean McKay, "Disgust: The Body and Soul Emotion," in *Handbook of Cognition and Emotion*, ed. Tim Dalgleish and Mick Power (Chichester, UK: Wiley, 1999), 433.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation & Constitutional Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), e-book edition.

<sup>42</sup> L. James Climenhage, "Gender Difference in Prejudice Toward Redheads" (PhD diss., Simon Fraser University, 2014), v.

Additionally, as discussed in Chapter Two, before “ginger” was widely used as a derogatory term to describe redheads in the US, it was a slur used against gay men in Britain.<sup>43</sup>

### 3.2.1 Disgust and humor

Disgust has also been studied in conjunction with humor, which is an important combination for the ginger phenomenon, since expressions of disgust towards ginger people are typically presented as (or at least defended as) jokes. When someone feels both amused and disgusted at the same time, the person is described as having “mixed feelings” about a particular image or situation.<sup>44</sup> These two emotions may act independently, in conflict with one another, or co-exist in malleable ways. Research has found that when a person who is an observer or an outsider to a particular situation experiences these two emotions combined, they are likely to experience enhanced amusement. When a person is the protagonist in a particular disgusting situation, or the object of disgust himself, amusement is less likely to occur.<sup>45</sup> Since only approximately six percent of people in England and approximately two percent of people in the United States (the two countries in which gingerism is most often considered serious) have red hair, we can assume that most people partaking in discourses of gingerism are not redheaded and thus would occupy the “outsider” position, leading them to combine their disgust with amusement.<sup>46</sup> The circulation of ginger jokes online is another example of Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner’s ambivalent

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<sup>43</sup> "ginger, n. and adj.1". OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/78372?rskey=qGT4i2&result=1> (accessed October 10, 2017).

<sup>44</sup> Scott H. Hemenover and Ulrich Schimmack, “That’s Disgusting!..., but Very Amusing: Mixed Feelings of Amusements and Disgust,” *Cognition and Emotion* 21, no. 5 (2007): 1110.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> John Naish, “Are You a Secret Redhead?”; Kyle Kelly, “20 Unbelievable Facts Every Ginger Person Should Know,” *What Culture*, March 27, 2014, <http://whatculture.com/offbeat/20-unbelievable-facts-every-ginger-person-know>.



internet, wherein content is often “antagonistic and social,” as well as “humorous and barbed.”<sup>47</sup>

Despite the clear polysemy of ginger texts, physical and emotional bullying of ginger people has led to teenage suicides.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, even though disgust is often associated with the ginger stereotype in joking discourses with amused tones, it can also have serious consequences.

### 3.2.2 Affects online

The internet is sometimes conceived of as an “unreal” space, but the discourses produced there often move offline and have real, material consequences. For example, Kick a Ginger Day began with a humorous Facebook event (which was as far as it was presumably intended to go), but resulted in physical attacks on children. Likewise, the circulation of poached and reappropriated portraits in the form of viral image macros (memes), are shared and spread wildly, constructing an exaggerated physical difference between gingers and non-gingers that leads to ostracization

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<sup>47</sup> Phillips and Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet*, 10.

<sup>48</sup> “Schoolboy Bullied Over Ginger Hair Hanged Himself,” *The Telegraph*, May 12, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/5312394/Schoolboy-bullied-over-ginger-hair-hanged-himself.html>; Aidan Radnedge, “‘Bullied into Suicide’ for Being Ginger: Father Forgot to Send Son ‘Love You’ Text,” *Metro UK*, November 14, 2013, <http://metro.co.uk/2013/11/14/simon-walters-boy-14-bullied-into-suicide-for-being-ginger-4187571/>; Eleanor Harding, “Make Ginger Taunts a Hate Crime, Says Father of Girl, 15, Found Dead in The Woods after Being Bullied,” *The Daily Mail*, November 28, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2514859/Helena-Farrell-15-killed-bullied-ginger.html/>; Charlene Adams, “Mother’s Anguish as 13-Year-Old Son Is ‘Bullied to Death’: Family Demands Action After Teen Commits Suicide ‘After Years of Abuse from His Classmates,’” *The Daily Mail*, November 23, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2846279/Teen-bullied-death-commits-suicide-years-verbal-physical-abuse-classmates.html>. Before the upsurge in internet-based ginger jokes, redheaded bullying was also blamed in the 2000 suicide of a teenage boy in Somerset, UK: Martin Winter, “Suicide of Boy Over Ginger-Hair Taunts; My Son Fled Bullies,” *The Mirror*, April 22, 2000, <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-61767573.html>. Additionally, in 2014 a 26 year old English woman with a history of mental illness allegedly killed herself because she feared that her hair looked ginger: Rod Minchin, “Woman ‘Killed Herself Because She Thought Her Hair Was Turning Ginger,’” *The Independent*, January 27, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/woman-killed-herself-because-she-thought-her-hair-was-turning-ginger-9089315.html>.

and bullying. In many ways, circulation of affect online is consistent with theories of affect in more traditional media contexts. The “newness” of affect on the internet or within social media is in how easily affects are now transmitted.

Looking at political discourses, Miles Orvell argues that media representations generally, and in particular representations on the internet, such as memes, “license affect.”<sup>49</sup> Like Rozin et al., Orvell believes that the power of negative affects online comes from their contagious nature, which is aided technologically by the seemingly effortless dissemination of information on the internet. Seeing one individual express a negative affect such as anger (or in the case of the ginger phenomenon, disgust) effectively functions as a license for others to do the same. The negative affect then, becomes the normal mode of expression about a particular topic. Here the normative mode of affectively responding to internet discourses about gingers has become one of disgust. Even further, because the codes of interpersonal communication online are not the same as they are in-person, those who perhaps would not stand for the bullying of gingers in a real-world setting might not have any impetus to intervene in an online space. It is easier for onlookers to disengage from these types of cyberbullying than it is from real world bullying that people physically witness.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, these discourses now circulate widely on popular social media platforms, so it is no longer necessary to have a direct interpersonal bullying relationship; individuals may encounter this content through many avenues.

Joanne Garde-Hansen and Kristyn Gorton also see media as affective tools, and suggest that online social media are particularly well-positioned for transmitting affect because they are

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<sup>49</sup> Miles Orvell, “The New Face of American Anger: Internet Imagery and the Power of Contagious Feeling,” in *Pictorial Cultures and Political Iconographies: Approaches, Perspectives, Case Studies from Europe and America*, ed. Udo J. Hebel and Christoph Wagner (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 231.

<sup>50</sup> Anna Ševčíková, David Šmahel, and Milada Otavová, “The Perception of Cyberbullying in Adolescent Victims,” *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties* 17, no. 3-4 (2012): 319-328.

already structurally networked.<sup>51</sup> In addition to being pre-networked, the internet and social media have global reach, so transmission of affect may spread further than it ever has before.<sup>52</sup> When discussing emotion and affect in the mediated sphere, strict boundaries do not exist between individuals and media objects, in the same way that affective contagion is theorized amongst groups of people. Rather, Garde-Hansen and Gorton suggest that there is “media inside me and me inside media” when affects are created and transmitted.<sup>53</sup> Adi Kuntsman further suggests that within digital cultures, there are “affective fabrics.” These fabrics are created when individuals name or express emotions online and thus begin to form communities (broadly defined) around these emotions. For example, this may take place through social media posts or sharing content on one, or across multiple platforms. Rather than having a singular impact, affective fabrics “reverberate” with a multiplicity of effects, and are intensified and transformed through digital circulation.<sup>54</sup> The ginger phenomenon was popularized in this way in the United States and subsequently beyond, beginning with the re-posting and sharing of Cartman’s affective assertion that ginger people are “nasty, yuck!”

### 3.3 GENDERED GINGER STEREOTYPES

In Druann Maria Heckert and Amy Best’s 1997 study of the social deviance of red hair, the researchers asked participants (who themselves had red hair) to identify stereotypes about redheads. Participants in the study identified the following stereotypes associated with red hair:

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<sup>51</sup> Joanne Garde-Hansen and Kristyn Gorton, “Introduction,” in *Emotion Online: Theorizing Affect on the Internet* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Adi Kuntsman, “Introduction: Affective Fabrics of Digital Cultures,” in *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion*, ed. Athina Karatzogianna and Adi Kuntsman (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1-2.

redheads are either extraordinarily beautiful or extraordinarily ugly, they have flaring tempers, they are clowns, they are “weird,” Irish, sun-challenged, and intellectually superior.

Significantly, participants also observed that in general, redheaded women are perceived as wild, while redheaded men are perceived as wimps.<sup>55</sup> Overall, popular cultural stereotypes about gingers are extremely gendered, as Heckert and Best’s study suggests. The simplistic version of these stereotypes that circulates via ginger memes is that redheaded men are viewed negatively, while redheaded women are viewed positively. Aspects of this are true; however, in what follows, I will complicate this binary through the lens of gender polarity, drawing from wider online discourses and the experiences of my narrators.

Gender polarization is dangerous not merely because it asserts that men and women are fundamentally different from one another, but also because it acts as an organizing principle that structures all aspects of our social life.<sup>56</sup> Gender polarization works in two ways. First, it defines being male and female as mutually exclusive categories, and secondly, it defines anyone who does not fit into these categories as “problematic.”<sup>57</sup> The categories of masculine and feminine are viewed not only as mutually exclusive and exhaustive, but also naturally complementary.<sup>58</sup> Gender complementarity leads to the argument that heterosexual pairings are both natural and necessary. Both of these concepts are part of an androcentric, or male-centered culture. In an androcentric culture, male experiences are defined as the norm, or as neutral, and female experiences are thus Othered.<sup>59</sup> Though it is possible to think of the ginger phenomenon as a

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<sup>55</sup> Druann Maria Heckert and Amy Best, “Ugly Duckling to Swan : Labeling Theory and the Stigmatization of Red Hair,” *Symbolic Interaction* 20, no. 4 (1997): 369.

<sup>56</sup> Sandra Bem, *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>58</sup> Lisa Brush, *Gender and Governance* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2003), 42.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

flipping of androcentrism, wherein redheaded women are the more powerful group, it is a limited kind of power afforded to women through their sexuality. It is better, therefore, to conceive of redheaded men and women as being subjected to different kinds of feminization or emasculation, wherein men are portrayed as weak, and women as only having value with regards to their sexuality, and thus *both* groups are Othered.

### **3.3.1 Mediated red hair stereotypes**

A central way in which society is ordered into the “normal” and the “deviant” is through stereotypes.<sup>60</sup> Stereotypes are produced through essentialization, reductionism, naturalization, and binary oppositions, often of disempowered or marginalized groups.<sup>61</sup> Mass media, as privileged institutions in the modern world, are especially implicated in the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes.<sup>62</sup> Unequal relationships are accentuated by derogatory media depictions of marginalized groups.<sup>63</sup> Within popular media, redheaded men, on the one hand, have been stereotyped as sexually unattractive and weak. Redheaded women, on the other hand, have historically been hypersexualized and perceived as having (limited) power through their sexuality. Though the historic stereotyping of the sexy redheaded woman at times still holds, now redheaded women are also susceptible to the negative connotations associated with the male ginger. A redheaded woman may also be stereotyped as a ginger if she meets specific phenotypic criteria (i.e., orange toned hair, very pale skin, an abundance of freckles, very light blonde eyebrows/eyelashes). Often sexualized redheaded women in mainstream media have dyed red

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<sup>60</sup> Hall 258

<sup>61</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE Publications Inc, 2003), 277.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>63</sup> Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen, *Typcasting: On the Arts and Sciences of Human Inequality* (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2006), e-book edition.

hair (and are thus perhaps “daywalkers,” not gingers) and do not embody any of these other characteristics.<sup>64</sup> From this perspective, gender polarization and gender complementarity describe the pre-ginger period from Chapter Two, but are complicated by the ginger phenomenon as it exists in the current moment. In order to account for this new development in the ginger phenomenon, wherein ginger women also take on the negative characteristics once only associated with ginger men, it is also useful to think of the ginger women as sometimes “degendered” and “desexualized,” often due to portrayals of disgust and grotesqueness, rather than, or in addition to not performing dominant modes of femininity, of which heterosexual attractiveness is a central part.

Additionally, there are representational biases due to the peculiarities of the media involved. Again, before the rise of social media, redheaded people were already viewed ambivalently, but the specific ginger-type did not exist as it does today. Historically, redheaded women were sexualized in film and animation that made use of the male gaze. Examples include the cartoon character of Jessica Rabbit, as well as stars such as Rita Hayworth, in iconic posters for roles like *Gilda*. Amanda Third describes the redheaded film star as having a “sexualized and spectacular prominence.”<sup>65</sup> Such filmic representations reflect historical stereotypes going back to the bible, such as those described in Chapter Two, about redheaded women being wanton and

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<sup>64</sup> In the original South Park episode, Eric Cartman labels people with red hair, but without light skin or freckles as “daywalkers,” which is presumably meant to describe Jewish people, rather than Celtic people. However, narrators used it to describe anyone without freckles. In this case, lack of freckles is sometimes interpreted as an indication that a person has dyed red hair, though this is of course not a reliable indicator and many people with naturally red hair do not have freckles.

<sup>65</sup> Amanda Third, “Does the Rug Match the Carpet?: Race, Gender and the Redheaded Woman,” in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 221.

uncontrollable. As my narrators will describe, in addition to reflecting redheaded stereotypes, these portrayals also perpetuate them.

While these sexualized stereotypes do still exist, they have also expanded to the point where women can be included in the ginger stereotype, as well. Significantly, film and television are no longer where the most significant representations of red hair circulate. The ginger stereotype is not constituted solely by social media. However, the rise of the nerdy ginger is partially a result of the ability of individuals to participate in the memetic creation of the ginger's new form online, via the racio-visual logic. Specifically, because people have easy access to programs like Photoshop that allow for manipulation of physical features, the visual distortion of the ginger has become part of the larger meme, and likely contributes to the "spectrum of gingeriness," which will be described below. Continual technological advances in media since the rise of the print industries have increased the capacity of individual media "to spawn mass impressions instantly," which has been a "pivotal factor in the dissemination of stereotypes."<sup>66</sup> The proliferation of social media and embracing of participatory re-mix culture have popularized and crystallized the ginger type.

### **3.3.2 Redhead versus ginger**

Most of my narrators, and notably, all of my women narrators, recognized a gendered dichotomy in popular redhead stereotypes. Within the simplified version of this dichotomy, they suggest that redheaded men are viewed negatively, and redheaded women are viewed positively. The gendered polarity of redheaded stereotypes can be summed up with the assertion that "redheads"

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<sup>66</sup> Ewen and Ewen, *Typecasting*, e-book edition.

are a distinct social group from “gingers.” In this framework, redheads are women and gingers are men. When I asked Luke Garratt to describe how his redheaded peers were perceived during middle and high school, he answered:

Probably the guys got more abuse than the girls. I suspect if you’re a girl, you’re sort of like a “beautiful redhead.” Versus if you’re a guy, you’re a “ginger.” You know? [laughing] That’s what I suspect it was.... Depends on the gender, right? So if you’re a woman, it’s like the fiery redheaded, or even sort of sexy and attractive, isn’t it. For a male? I don’t know what’s associated with it. I’m not really sure, actually. I don’t really know what people associate. It’s definitely not fiery, beautiful, and attractive [laughing].<sup>67</sup>

Luke described the perceived gendered split between the “beautiful redhead,” who is desired, and the “ginger,” who is not. Though he was “unaware” of the stereotypes associated with redheaded men, most of my narrators were able to describe them specifically. For example, Maryellen described the ginger man as, “bookish, nerdy, probably wears glasses.”<sup>68</sup> Andy, recalling that he used to be taunted with the phrase “stupid ginger,” shared that, “I think the women get more sexualized, definitely, because you see on redheaded [Facebook] pages, redheaded women are always just like these gorgeous exotic beauties.” In contrast, men, “just can’t do the macho thing.” However, it is important to note that the “beautiful” or “exotic” category that Luke and Andy recognized is not necessarily a positive one. Being hypersexualized or fetishized is not a compliment, though it is perceived as such by some men who feel they are excluded from the category of sexual attractiveness based on their physical appearance. On the contrary, hypersexualization is connected to anti-women attitudes, feelings of legitimized

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<sup>67</sup> Luke Garratt, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Oxford, UK, August 7, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Maryellen Kilcullen, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, via Skype, March 22, 2015.



violence, and sexual harassment.<sup>69</sup> Dan Wallace described the more negative connotations associated with women who are sexualized because of their red hair:

Yeah, there's definitely stereotypes, like fire crotch. As a male [myself], I think that males look at female redheads as kind of being slutty, you know? Yeah. I mean...put it this way "redheaded slut," the drink. Where did that come from? It's a stereotype. Jessica Rabbit, yeah.<sup>70</sup>

Terms like "fire crotch," describing red pubic hair, are often used to demean redheaded women. In 2006, near the beginning of the ginger phenomenon within the US context, actress Lindsay Lohan, then nineteen years old, was tormented with this term in popular online press and gossip columns, after it was used to describe her by then-nemeses, socialites Brandon Davis and Paris Hilton. In a video that went viral, Davis stated that, "Lindsay Lohan is a firecrotch, she has freckles coming out of her vagina, and her clitoris is seven feet long."<sup>71</sup> Lohan's case reflects the negative side of the binary of desire/hatred that accompanies the hypersexualization of women's bodies. It also reflects the biologization of redheaded sexuality, which will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Hypersexualization of women and demasculinization of men are both part of the ginger phenomenon. One example of this binary as it has been memefied is an image macro that

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<sup>69</sup> Erin Hatton and Mary Nell Trautner, "Equal Opportunity Objectification?: The Sexualization of Men and Women on the Cover of Rolling Stone," *Sexuality and Culture* 15, no. 3 (2011): 257–8.

<sup>70</sup> Dan Wallace, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Winthrop, MA, July 9, 2016.

<sup>71</sup> The video is available at: "Paris Hilton Cracks Up at Brandon Davis's EPIC Lindsay Lohan 'Fire Crotch' Rant [2006]," X17 Online, July 28, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWQ-BaTAeOs>. For online press and tabloid coverage of the outburst, see: "Brandon Davis and Paris: The Incredible Hatred Toward Lindsay," *TMZ*, May 17, 2006, <http://www.tMZ.com/2006/05/17/paris-and-brandon-davis-the-incredible-hatred-toward-lindsay>; "Everyone's Talking About Brandon Davis's Rant on Lindsay Lohan," *Celebitchy*, May 18, 2006, [http://www.celebitchy.com/867/everyones\\_talking\\_about\\_brando](http://www.celebitchy.com/867/everyones_talking_about_brando); Jessica, "Brandon Davis Expresses Himself on the Matter of Lindsay Lohan," *Gawker*, May 17, 2006, <http://gawker.com/174466/brandon-davis-expresses-himself-on-the-matter-of-lindsay-lohan>; "Return of 'Firecrotch' - Lindsay Feud Not Over," *TMZ*, August 13, 2006, <http://www.tMZ.com/2006/08/13/return-of-firecrotch-lindsay-feud-not-over>.

employs a side-by-side comparison, positioning figures considered beautiful versus those considered ugly. The figures are labeled “redhead” versus “ginger.” Text at the bottom of the meme reads: “know the difference. . . .” The “redhead” is almost always a woman, and the “ginger” is almost always a man or a boy. It is rare that two women or two men are used in comparison in this type of meme. There are several versions of this meme that use the similar text but images of different people. On the left is always an image of a sexualized, feminine person above the caption “redhead.” Typically these women are models or adult film stars, but not people whose primary association is with being ginger. On the right, under the caption “ginger” are a variety of nerdy looking redheaded men. In contrast with the women, however, all of the men are recognizable faces within the ginger phenomenon. The “ginger” position is typically filled by one of the three following figures: Aaron Mishkin, victim of the first Kick a Ginger Day in 2008, “Coppercab” a YouTube celebrity who came to fame with their viral rant against *South Park*’s assertion that gingers “have no souls” and was subsequently caricatured by *South Park*, and child actor Charlie Stewart of the “Over Confident Ginger” meme series. The visual depiction of redheads as distinct from gingers supports my argument that these image macros are in part responsible for the creation of the ginger as a socially different type of person. As Sander Gilman explains, when physical appearances are used to create boundaries and hierarchies in societies, “each physical category must be so constructed that it has a clearly defined, unambiguous antithesis. . . .these categories are all socially defined so as to make belonging to the positive category more advantageous than belonging to the negative category.”<sup>72</sup> Therefore, the redhead is now a contrary figure to the ginger, despite the fact that until recently these two terms were used interchangeably, and in some cultural contexts, still are.

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<sup>72</sup> Sander Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 2000), 23.

An interesting example to consider alongside ginger memes, especially in their gendered forms, is anti-Irish political cartoons. To create distinctions between Anglo people and Irish immigrants to both the US and UK, many artists used direct, side-by-side comparisons. In his 1866 illustrated text, *New Physiognomy, or, Signs of Character, as Manifested through Temperament and External Forms, and Especially in "The Human Face Divine,"* physiognomist and artist Samuel R. Wells included a cartoon image entitled "Contrasted Faces" (see image 3.10).<sup>73</sup> The two faces that are contrasted belong to Florence Nightingale, the famed English nurse and "Brigid McBruiser," a prototypical female Irish immigrant living in England. Nightingale appears as an elegant, young woman with her hair pinned back neatly, wearing an elaborate collar and a necklace. McBruiser on the other hand, wears rumpled plain clothing, has apparently thinning and unevenly shorn hair, an extremely broad face, and heavy wrinkles.

Supposed differences in physiognomy, the "science" of judging internal character from facial features, found their way into cartoon representations of different ethnic and racial groups during the mid-to-late 1800s by way of caricature.<sup>74</sup> These so-called racial sciences "used appearance as a means of determining who was fit and who was ill, who could reproduce and 'improve' the race and who should be excluded and condemned."<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, scientific justification also explained English prosperity and Irish poverty as natural conditions.<sup>76</sup> In McBruiser we see an exaggerated unnatural facial shape and a heavy brow bone, which indicated a variety of negative internal characteristics ascribed to Irish people. With regard to Nightingale and McBruiser, Wells writes,

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<sup>73</sup> Samuel R. Wells, *New Physiognomy, or, Signs of Character, as Manifested Through Temperament and External Forms, and Especially in "The Human Face Divine"* (New York: Fowler and Wells Publishers, 1866).

<sup>74</sup> Dewey, *Art of Ill Will*, 7.

<sup>75</sup> Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful*, 16.

<sup>76</sup> de Nie, *The Eternal Paddy*, 9.

The former would be governed by high moral principles, the latter by the lower or animal passions; the one is a natural friend and philanthropist; the other is at war with everybody; the one is forgiving, the other is vindictive; the one is, by sympathy, attracted toward the heavenly and the good; the other is of the earth, earthy, seeking her chief pleasure from things physical and animal.<sup>77</sup>

In this cartoon, we see the visual exaggeration of the features from which Wells draws his conclusions about these women's temperaments. Frederick Burr Opper's 1883 cartoon, "The Irish Declaration of Independence that We are All Familiar With," published on the cover of the US humor magazine *Puck*, offers a similar comparison.<sup>78</sup> In this image, we again see an English woman on the left, and an Irish woman on the right. This time, however, we see their full bodies, instead of just their faces. The theme of beautifulness versus ugliness persists in this image; again, we see the English woman depicted with neatly done hair and delicate facial features, while the Irish woman's hair is tied up in a rag and her face is reminiscent of comparisons made between Irish men, black men, and monkeys.<sup>79</sup> What is more striking than the beautiful/ugly dichotomy here, however, is the size and body positions of each figure. The English woman is slender with an accentuated waistline, and small hands, clasped in a pleading manner. The Irish woman is pictured with a raised fist, intimidating the English woman. She is masculinized by both her stance, and her large, muscular body. Of particular note are the size of her hands and feet in relation to the English woman's. The cartoon not only masculinizes Irish women, but also undermines (and thus potentially demasculinizes) Irish men and their role in the pursuit of Irish independence from England, by reducing it to an interpersonal conflict between a woman of privilege and her subordinate in the kitchen.

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<sup>77</sup> Wells, *New Physiognomy*, 537-8.

<sup>78</sup> Frederick Burr Opper, "The Irish Declaration of Independence that We are All Familiar With," *Puck* 13, no. 322 (1883).

<sup>79</sup> Roger A. Fischer, *Them Damned Pictures: Explorations in American Political Cartoon Art* (North Haven, CT: Archon Books, 1996), 74.

As described above, there are several formal similarities between these political cartoons and redhead versus ginger memes. The “redhead” is visualized in the form of a stereotypically attractive red-haired woman, aligning with the British figure, whereas the “ginger” is visualized as an ugly red-haired man, aligning with the Irish figure. Both sets of images are dichotomous and lined up for a side-by-side comparison. In both cases, in order to legitimize the symbolic constructions of each as different types of people, creators of these images exaggerate features and juxtapose these images with others. Both sets of images reflect Lisa Nakamura’s racio-visual logic, which has flourished in the age of new media, but can be seen in historical examples, as well. Because anti-Irish prejudice, especially during times of mass immigration, is often invoked in attempts to legitimize gingerism as a kind of racial or ethnic prejudice, it is possible to consider these comparative images as proto-ginger memes. I will engage more deeply with these themes in Chapter Five.

### **3.3.3 Women inhabiting both categories**

Although the redhead/ginger dichotomy can be seen in many areas of popular culture, these categories are still somewhat fluid, and redhead and ginger are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories—at least when applied to women. Though most women did experience stereotyping that lined up with the gender binary, such as being hypersexualized, they also described themselves as fitting into the ginger stereotype, in various ways. Men, however, did not have the experience of being sexualized. In other words, women can be either or both, gingers and redheads, but men can only be gingers. Eva Kennworthy suggested that, “I mean obviously if you have red hair, if you’re a woman, they assume that you’re a whore, a slut.” Eva was subjected to these redhead woman stereotypes as early as sixth grade. At the same time, she

also faced teasing which labeled her as “gross,” such as when her peers insisted that her freckles were chicken pox, which is more in line with aspects of gingeriness than redheadedness. As she went into her teenage years, she internalized ginger stereotypes about being ugly. She “remember[ed] watching *Married with Children* and wanting to look like Kelly Bundy because that was pretty to me and there was nobody else [that looked like me].”

One’s labeling as a ginger or redhead is also dependent on what several of my narrators described as a “spectrum” of redheadedness, or gingeriness. Andy explained that, “I’ve had people say ‘you don’t look bad for a redhead,’ ‘you don’t look like the other redheads,’ and I don’t know what it is, facial structure or a freckle density, or just certain pigmentation, but there’s a spectrum, everything’s a spectrum of course, and so [there is] the spectrum of redhairedness and gingeriness.”<sup>80</sup> Barbara and Vicki suggested that the most desirable hair color is dark red and least desirable is a “burnt orange.”<sup>81</sup> Maryellen further described that, “there are redheads that are very, very pale, with like blue eyes that have almost no freckles and can be almost blonde, or can have bright, bright fiery red hair, and lots of freckles, and there are people with less red hair, [that] sort of have dark red, almost brown hair.”<sup>82</sup> On the one hand, at the ginger end of the spectrum, which is generally more stigmatized, are qualities such as very light skin, light eyelashes and eyebrows, lots of freckles, and bright orange-toned hair. At the redhead end of the spectrum, which can be either stigmatized or valued and desirable, on the other hand, are qualities such as not quite as light skin, darker lashes and brows, fewer freckles, and hair that is closer to a true red color, or is more reddish-brown.

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<sup>80</sup> Andy Haverkamp, oral history interview with Donica O’Malley, Portland, OR May 21, 2016.

<sup>81</sup> Barbara and Vicki, oral history interview with Donica O’Malley, Crosshaven, Ireland, August 22, 2015.

<sup>82</sup> Maryellen Kilcullen, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, via Skype, March 22, 2015.

Perhaps due to the historical connection between freckled or tanned skin and outdoor labor, there is also a class dimension to the distinction between gingers and redheads. Barbara described this aspect: “I was just saying, ‘I’m not ginger, I’m more a titian color,’ [laughter] with Sarah Ferguson emerging in the royal family, she had the lovely red hair, and that also brought it out again in the ‘80s, and it was more acceptable to be that color in a nice way.”<sup>83</sup> Barbara’s comment reflects what Mark Twain wrote in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* in 1889: “when redheaded people are above a certain social grade, their hair is auburn.”<sup>84</sup> Within the current context, the language has shifted from Twain’s use of redheaded/auburn to ginger/redhead.

Today, tanned and freckled skin are no longer grouped together as evidence of lower-class status. Since at least the 1960s, tanness has connoted leisure, wealth, and health in Western societies.<sup>85</sup> Being freckled, in contrast, now represents an apparent inability to tan. The inclusion of tanness as a physical ideal over paleness also reflects the beauty and other industries’ attempts to market their products to a wider demographic. As discussed in the introduction, people of white European descent will soon be a minority in the US and UK. Ethnically ambiguous, “off-white” models and actors are now increasingly used in an effort to advertise to wider demographics of people.<sup>86</sup> Such advertising images shape beauty norms.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, I see the shift in perceptions of women with red hair from solely redheads, to both or either

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<sup>83</sup> Barbara and Vicki, oral history interview with Donica O’Malley, Crosshaven, Ireland, August 22, 2015.

<sup>84</sup> Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishing, 1889), 159.

<sup>85</sup> Dyer, *White*, 159.

<sup>86</sup> Mary Beltrán, “Mixed Race in Latinowood: Latino Stardom and Ethnic Ambiguity in the Era of *Dark Angels*,” in *Mixed Race Hollywood*, ed. Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas (New York University Press, 2008): 260.

<sup>87</sup> Katherine Frith, Ping Shaw, and Hong Chen, “The Construction of Beauty: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Women’s Magazine Advertising,” *Journal of Communication* 55, no. 1 (2005): 57.

redheads/gingers, as aided by two factors. First, as previously mentioned, the transition from primarily filmic and televisual representations of red hair to digital social media representations means that newer depictions of redheaded people are subjected to editing and distortion, typically in negative ways. A parallel effect can be seen through Instagram, wherein new stylized notions of beauty have been created through “filters.” None of these filters imitate a pale, freckled aesthetic, but many of them offer versions of tanness.<sup>88</sup> Secondly, in relationship to the previous point, the idealized skin color within the Western Anglo context has changed to a *slightly* darker tone. I do not mean to say that whiteness, as a category, is no longer venerated and privileged within all social institutions, including beauty standards. Colorism remains an enormous problem in non-white communities, and globally, pale skin is preferred.<sup>89</sup> Rather, what I am pointing to is an effect of the latest expansion of whiteness, as theorized by Nell Irvin Painter.<sup>90</sup> Through capitalism and consumerism, more people, especially light-skinned Asian and Latinx people, are being “invited” into whiteness.<sup>91</sup> Images of increasingly diverse (but still quite

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<sup>88</sup> In 2011 Bluebear Technologies released an app called “Ginger Booth,” which does act as a filter that provides a pale, freckled aesthetic:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/gingerbooth/id418343011?mt=8&affid=1879721&ign-mpt=uo%3D4>. The app was met with mixed reviews from the ginger pride community; some found it humorous, while others found it offensive. Notably, this is a separate app, not a filter included on mainstream social media platforms such as Instagram or SnapChat.

<sup>89</sup> Recent work on colorism in various racial groups has included articles such as: Nayeli Y. Chavez-Dueñas, Hector Y. Adames, and Kurt C. Organista, “Skin-Color Prejudice and Within-Group Racial Discrimination,” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 36, no. 1 (2014): 3-26; Anjala S. Krishen, Michael S. LaTour, and Elnaz Jalilipour Alishah, “Asian Females in an Advertising Context: Exploring Skin Tone Tension,” *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising* 35, no. 1 (2014): 71-85; Matthew A. Painter, Malcolm D. Holmes, Jenna Bateman, “Skin Tone, Race/Ethnicity, and Wealth Inequality among New Immigrants,” *Social Forces* 94, no. 3 (2015): 1153-1185; Verna M. Keith, et al., “Microaggressions, Discrimination, and Phenotype among African Americans: A Latent Class Analysis of the Impact of Skin Tone and BMI,” *Sociological Inquiry* 87, no. 2 (2017): 233-255.

<sup>90</sup> Painter, *The History of White People*, 390. Also, it is important to keep in mind that, as discussed in Chapter Two, even in the 1970s, extremely pale, freckled skin was never idealized in the same way as “regular” white skin.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*



limited) groups of people are popularized through mainstream institutions, such as advertising. In response, the excessive whiteness of the ginger represents fears about the stability of normative whiteness against such evidence of demographic changes. While these fears are most often placed onto red-haired men, within recent years, as described above, they have also been placed onto red-haired women.

### 3.3.4 The Over Confident Ginger meme

In this section I will trace the history of one of the most popular ginger image macro forms: the “Over Confident Ginger,” in order to provide more insight into how gendered ginger memes actually circulate online. According to [knowyourmeme.com](http://knowyourmeme.com), the Over Confident Ginger meme first began with the submission of “Over Confident Ginger Goes to the Beach” to Reddit on March 3, 2012.<sup>92</sup> Limor Shifman describes places such as Reddit, 4chan, and Tumblr as “popular ‘meme hubs’” wherein “a constant flow of Internet memes is uploaded and negotiated daily.”<sup>93</sup> This meme features the face of child actor Charlie Stewart in what appears to be a press photograph, accompanied by the text: “Takes shirt off at beach/bursts into flames.” In the Reddit comments section this meme already begin to take on new forms.<sup>94</sup> Such “participation by reappropriation” is one of the basic premises of memetic media.<sup>95</sup> One response to the original meme reads, “They didn’t even have the courtesy to use the good one,” and links to a new image, hosted on [imgur](http://imgur.com), reflecting the logic of collectivism. Moving between platforms via

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<sup>92</sup> “Over Confident Ginger,” *Know Your Meme*, 2012, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/over-confident-ginger>.

<sup>93</sup> Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 13.

<sup>94</sup> “Over Confident Ginger Goes to the Beach,” *Reddit*, March 3, 2012, [https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/qdy29/over\\_confident\\_ginger\\_goes\\_to\\_the\\_beach](https://www.reddit.com/r/AdviceAnimals/comments/qdy29/over_confident_ginger_goes_to_the_beach).

<sup>95</sup> Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 2.

hyperlinks likewise reveals the multimodal logic of memetics. The new image features one of the common Photoshop techniques used to make gingers look non-human. The subject's facial features are shrunk and placed in the center of his face, creating a new image that is both humorous and grotesque. Such distortions are reminiscent of the tradition of ethnic caricature, which visually derived from the racist pseudosciences of physiognomy and phrenology, as seen in "Contrasted Faces."<sup>96</sup> Historically, caricatures of marginalized groups have reflected "fantasies of racial superiority" in their viewers.<sup>97</sup> Caricatured images are fluid, however, and over time can come to represent racialized stereotypes, as well as ironic, ambivalent, or humorous feelings from both outsiders and from those who are stereotyped.<sup>98</sup> Here, though the group that is caricatured is pseudoracialized, as I will argue in Chapter Five, they are still part of the dominant racial group. Thus, rather than reflecting fantasies of racial superiority, as I described above, ginger memes represent fears about the dominant group's own racial inferiority and instability.

Just one day after the submission of the caricatured version of this image to imgur, user "blackspeed" submitted a compilation of sixteen new Over Confident Ginger memes to the image sharing site, funnyjunk.com. Additionally, knowyourmeme.com catalogues forty-two versions of this meme, all created approximately six years ago, during the initial hype. Finally, the meme creation site, quickmeme.com hosts over sixty pages of iterations of these images. The speed with which these images proliferated various platforms represents the logics of both resonance and spread. Not all of these iterations became wildly successful, but the top ones, for

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<sup>96</sup> Kerry Soper, "From Swarthy Ape to Sympathetic Everyman and Subversive Trickster: The Development of Irish Caricature in American Comic Strips between 1890 and 1920," *Journal of American Studies* 39, no. 2 (Aug. 2005): 260.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 262.

example “Auditions for Jazz Band/Not Enough Soul” are shared hundreds of thousands of times directly from this site alone. As with most social media today, sharing is built right into these platforms. Quickmeme allows users to create memes and instantly share them to Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and Pinterest. Knowyourmeme links to Facebook, Google+ and Stumbleupon. Imgur links to all of these sites and to Reddit and Tumblr, as well.

Numbers of shares listed on each of these sites do not take into account the life these images take on once they are released onto smaller social media platforms, sent through private messaging, or when they are copied, screenshot, or otherwise repurposed outside of the official sharing mechanisms built into these sites. It is nearly impossible to comprehensively track the spreading of memes such as this one, or to make verifiable claims about how popular they are, but according to Google trends, the Over Confident Ginger meme was most often searched for in the months closest to its initial creation. Surprisingly, searches for “ginger memes,” more generally, have actually increased since March 2012 until the present, despite the fact that has been more than a decade since the start of the ginger phenomenon. More important than verifying origin or making claims about reach, is memes’ resonance within the popular culture.<sup>99</sup> The Over Confident Ginger meme did not start the ginger phenomenon, nor was it the first ginger meme. Rather, I attribute its popularity to the fact that it tapped into cultural attitudes about gingers that had been growing since 2005 and subsequently amplified them. In the next section, I will discuss how this particular meme genre, along with one other, both reflects and creates ginger stereotypes, paying particular attention to these meme’s construction of hyperwhite masculinity, as reflected in the ginger man.

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<sup>99</sup> Milner, *The World Made Meme*, 15.

### 3.3.5 Ginger masculinity as antithetical to black masculinity

Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear argue that memes “directly generate and shape” mindsets and behaviors in particular social groups.<sup>100</sup> Memes allegedly contain instances of “truth,” which is what is supposed make them funny, along with their strict allegiance to form. Meme creators’ anonymity may facilitate the production of racist or sexist jokes.<sup>101</sup> Although this type of humor has historically had some capacity for subversion, within a society that mistakenly views itself as postfeminist and postracial, gendered and racial humor lose their subversive potential and are likely to be read in dangerous, essentializing ways.<sup>102</sup> The ginger figure, and ginger memes in particular, present themselves as the perfect antidote to this situation. Ginger memes take up the written and visual language of ethnic and gender stereotypes and place them onto the white ginger male body, effectively Othering it and labeling it as something new and different. Since they are a white group, talking about gingers in this way protects meme creators from being labeled as “racist.” At the same, these memes often reference black masculinity’s “coolness” as a counterpoint, specifically to ginger men’s, rather than white men’s generally, lack of cool. In doing so, they suggest that gingers are “the white guys that white guys make fun of.”<sup>103</sup>

As previously discussed, social perceptions of ginger men are mostly in line with stereotypes associated with white nerd masculinity. Gingers are consistently portrayed or

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<sup>100</sup> Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, “Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Productions,” in *A New Literacies Sampler*, ed. Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 199.

<sup>101</sup> Patrick Davison, “The Language of Internet Memes,” in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 132.

<sup>102</sup> Jonathan Rossing, “Deconstructing Post-Racialism: Humor as a Critical, Cultural Project,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 36, no. 1 (2012): 44-61.

<sup>103</sup> The phrase, “ginger, the white guys that white guys make fun of” comes from a memefied school yearbook photograph and caption: <http://weknowmemes.com/2013/03/ginger-the-white-guys-that>.

received as effeminate, ugly, weak, and sometimes childlike—or in Michael Kimmel’s words, as “less than real men.”<sup>104</sup> The creation of this excessive whiteness represented by ginger men distances traditional white masculinity from these stereotypes and places it onto the ginger as a scapegoat. Scapegoats are often initially chosen for representing the highest ideals of the group—gingers are often quite the “whitest” men, both in terms of literal skin color and stereotyped character traits.<sup>105</sup> However, they are quickly Othered and the boundaries of the dominant group are redrawn to exclude the scapegoat. Therefore, the qualities with which the ginger is ascribed, which of course are qualities that reflect whiteness itself, become irredeemable.<sup>106</sup> In contrast to stereotypes about white masculinity, black men in the US have historically been stereotyped as physically strong, but intellectually inept. They have also been viewed as hypersexual, which is read as both threatening to white women, and anxiety producing for white men.<sup>107</sup> Men of Hispanic or Latino origin are likewise often stereotyped as exaggeratedly dominant and aggressive.<sup>108</sup> White youth male culture has sought to appropriate these perceptions of “coolness” that are ascribed to masculinities of color. Importantly, this appropriation of aspects of black or Latino masculinity within mainstream white does not indicate struggle for racial equality; it demonstrates the privilege of white people merely performing blackness, without embodying its social consequences.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Michael Kimmel, “Judaism, Masculinity, and Feminism,” in *The Still Small Voice: Reflections on Being a Jewish Man*, ed. Michael G. Holzman (New York: URJ Press, 2008), 95-98.

<sup>105</sup> C. Allen Carter, *Kenneth Burke and the Scapegoat Process* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 19.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>107</sup> Manning Marable, “The Black Male: Searching Beyond Stereotypes,” in *Men’s Lives*, ed. Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon), 18-24.

<sup>108</sup> Maxine Baca Zinn, “Chicano Men and Masculinity,” in Kimmel and Messner, *Men’s Lives*, 26.

<sup>109</sup> Norman Mailer addressed this phenomenon in *The White Negro* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1957). Other work on this subject since then has included sources like: Thomas Frank, *The*

Gingerness replaces whiteness as the opposite of blackness, in meme form. The very title of the image macro genre on which I have been focusing, the Over Confident Ginger, suggests that gingers should not or cannot be confident, presumably because everyone in the audience of these memes already knows that they are “losers.” In order to make this clear, the ginger man is contrasted with the idea of “cool black masculinity” in two different types of ginger memes. The first is a subset of the Over Confident Ginger in which reference to gingers “having no soul,” as explained in the original *South Park* episode, is interpreted as a lack of soul in the sense of jazz music. The second is a series of images of redheaded men with what can be described as ginger afros, all captioned by text that undermines their coolness, particularly by ridiculing their sexual appeal. The aforementioned “Auditions for Jazz Band/Not Enough Soul” meme is the most popular of the ginger memes that reinterprets *South Park*’s assertion that gingers “have no souls” in a religious sense, to refer to the idea of “soul” as “a type of primal, spiritual energy and passionate joy,” that connotes both black male sexual desire and excellence in musical expression.<sup>110</sup> The ginger then is effectively excluded from this category that positions black men as simultaneously attractive, cool, talented and passionate.

The inclusion of the ginger afro in many memes can be interpreted in a similar way. Such memes typically depict ginger men and boys as romantically or sexually inept. One

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*Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Mary Bucholtz, “You Da Man: Narrating the Racial Other in the Production of White Masculinity,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3, no. 4 (1999): 443-460; E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Les Back, “The ‘White Negro’ Revisited: Race and Masculinities in South London,” in *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies*, ed. Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne (London: Routledge, 2003), 171-182; Bill Youssman, “Blackophilia and Blackophobia: White Youth, the Consumption of Rap Music, and White Supremacy,” *Communication Theory* 13, no. 4 (2003): 366-391.

<sup>110</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 4; 12; Ulf Hannerz, “What Negroes Mean by Soul,” *Trans-action* 5, no. 8 (1968): 57-58.

example of this is the previously mentioned, “My helmet protects my virginity” meme. Another example depicts an overweight adolescent redheaded male, directly facing the camera with text that reads: “Ladies, please/Control your orgasms.” Meme creators assume that the viewing public is familiar with the cultural stereotypes associated with ginger men and audiences understand we are to laugh at this subject, rather than take him seriously. On black men, natural afro hairstyles, as Marlene de Witte explains, are part of the urban aesthetic that Rebecca Walker describes as “black cool.” For Walker, “black cool” describes an ineffable aesthetic that is “beautiful,” “fresh,” “sleek,” and confident—all things that the ginger precisely cannot be.<sup>111</sup> Of course the power made accessible to a person by invoking “coolness” is quite limited and as history has shown, the stability of white masculinity’s power is not meaningfully threatened by black masculinity’s cool aesthetic. However, in the current context where boundaries of whiteness are again expanding to accommodate new groups, these fears resurface. The lines are redrawn, not to exclude cool black masculinity, but to exclude white nerd masculinity, in order to protect normative white masculinity’s status.

### 3.4 REDHEADED COMEDY

Only a small number of leading men actors or Hollywood love interests have red hair, likely because of the way redheaded men’s masculinity is constructed as less than “manly,” and Western media’s reliance on performances of dominant masculinity as ideal. In fact, a 2016 article from the *Guardian* revealed that the award-winning actor Colin Firth was almost not hired

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<sup>111</sup> Marlene de Witte, “Heritage, Blackness, and Afro-Cool: Styling Africanness in Amsterdam,” *African Diaspora* 7, no. 2 (2014): 260-89; Rebecca Walker, “Introduction,” in *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness*, ed. Rebecca Walker (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2012), xi-xv.

to play Mr. Darcy in the BBC's 1995 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* because script writer Andrew Davies thought his hair was "too ginger," and thus he was not considered masculine enough to be a leading man.<sup>112</sup> In my interviews, Maryellen shared that from a theater perspective,

I mean, there was one student while I've been in college [as a theater major] that had very, very red hair, and he was very handsome and very fit and whatnot, but I don't think he ever played a romantic lead. I can't think of any theater actors that are quote unquote leading men, I mean, that's kind of a lose term, but that have bright red hair and very pale skin. I can't think of [any].<sup>113</sup>

Dillon, another aspiring actor, noticed that even in the few instances where there are naturally redheaded actors in leading roles, they typically dye their hair and do not play redheaded characters. When Dillon mentioned Benedict Cumberbatch as an example, his girlfriend Jessica remembered that,

I mentioned that as a fact once, and a girl goes, "ew that makes me like him [Cumberbatch] less, that's disgusting that he's actually a redhead." And I was like "you just met my boyfriend! And he's a redhead [too]! Like really? You think that's okay to say about someone?" I just thought that was rude.<sup>114</sup>

One notable exception to this trend is actor Damian Lewis, who has starred in a series of leading roles in both American and British media in the last few years. Lewis is often talked about as a rare example of a "hot ginger" in popular online discourse.<sup>115</sup> Still, Lewis cannot totally break free of all ginger stereotypes. In 2013 he stated in the *Daily Express* that, "I'd like to do a romance. I'd really like to do a film where at the end I kiss the girl and look into the sunset

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<sup>112</sup> Press Association, "Colin Firth Was Told to Dye Hair for *Pride and Prejudice* as He Was 'Too Ginger,'" *Guardian*, September 22, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/sep/22/colin-firth-pride-and-prejudice-andrew-davies-mr-darcy-bbc>.

<sup>113</sup> Maryellen Kilcullen, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, via Skype, March 22, 2015.

<sup>114</sup> Dillon Johnson and Jessica Hopkins, oral history interviews by Donica O'Malley, Cambridge, MA, January 19, 2016.

<sup>115</sup> "Hottest Ginger Men: Damian Lewis," E! News, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://www.eonline.com/photos/5520/hottest-ginger-men/200186>.



together.... But it just doesn't happen for some reason. Maybe my hair's too red. Maybe no one thinks a redhead could ever get the girl."<sup>116</sup> Prince Harry is another redheaded celebrity, though not an actor, who occasionally breaks the stereotype of being unattractive. He was recently asked, "How does it feel being a ginger with Meghan?" at a recent press event after he and fiancé Meghan Markle announced their engagement. Notably, the headline from the *Times* article reporting on the event changed the quote to read, "Prince Harry Gets Asked How a 'Ginger' Like Him Landed Meghan Markle," further delegitimizing ginger men's sexual appeal.<sup>117</sup> The satirical site *Waterford Whispers News* apparently anticipated such coverage in their article published four days earlier. In "Gingers Warned Not to Get Any Big Ideas," the author states,

THE GLOBAL ginger community has been officially warned today not to get any big ideas after it was announced that American actor Meghan Markle is to wed ginger and royal, Prince Harry, in spring 2018 at Kensington Palace.

A joint statement released by the British government and Buckingham Palace urged people with red hair to not get their hopes up over the news, pointing out that Prince Harry is a lot wealthier than they are and is of royal blood, so 'don't even go there'.<sup>118</sup>

The indistinguishability of satire and mainstream press here speaks to the polysemy of ginger jokes and reflects the concept of the ambivalent internet.

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<sup>116</sup> Day & Night, "Damian Lewis Thinks His Ginger Hair Is Keeping Him From Romance," *Express*, July 29, 2013, <https://www.express.co.uk/celebrity-news/418192/Damian-Lewis-thinks-his-ginger-hair-is-keeping-him-from-romance>.

<sup>117</sup> Ashley Hoffman, "Prince Harry Gets Asked How a 'Ginger' Like Him Landed Meghan Markle. He Nails the Response," *Time*, December 1, 2017, [http://time.com/5044751/prince-harry-ginger-meghan-markle-video/?utm\\_campaign=time&utm\\_source=facebook.com&utm\\_medium=social&xid=time\\_socialflow\\_facebook](http://time.com/5044751/prince-harry-ginger-meghan-markle-video/?utm_campaign=time&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&xid=time_socialflow_facebook).

<sup>118</sup> "Gingers Warned Not to Get Any Big Ideas," *Waterford Whispers News*, November 27, 2017, <http://waterfordwhispersnews.com/2017/11/27/gingers-warned-not-to-get-any-big-ideas>.

For redheaded comedians and comic actors, more so than “serious” actors and public figures, redheadedness seems to be a more acceptable feature, perhaps because it is already viewed as inherently funny. Many comedians work their red hair into their acts. For example, British comedian Alasdair Beckett-King did a set at the 2017 Edinburgh Fringe festival about the rumored imminent extinction of gingers that went viral online. In the act, he reports that he is surprised to hear that the “real culprit” for impending extinction is climate change, because he thought the reason was “because no one was having sex with us.”<sup>119</sup> Beckett-King’s comments tap into the cultural perception that redheaded men are heterosexually unattractive. This phenomenon also sometimes applies to women, though there are more leading redheaded actresses than actors, and fewer female redheaded comedians. The split ties into the aforementioned redhead/ginger dichotomy. Kathy Griffin, for example, has for a long time been labeled as “a” or “the redhead” in popular press, but recently has been described as ugly by tabloids and internet commenters, with reference to being a ginger. In a 2010 article titled, “Kathy Griffin, You’re an Unfunny Asshole,” Stacey Russel of the *Miami New Times* included “you’re a serious ginger...um, that’s all,” as one of seven reasons why people should not like Griffin.<sup>120</sup> Griffin recently began participating in the ginger meme herself via social media, as well. She referenced the cultural “war on gingers” in a 2015 interview and in 2017 tweeted that

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<sup>119</sup> Adam Spencer, “Alasdair Beckett-King on Gingers,” September 1 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p05dws4v>. Although it is popularly talked about in conversations about redheadedness, the rumor that redheaded people are going extinct has been debunked by scientists: Adam Rutherford, “Relax, Redheads, You’re not about to Die Out,” *Guardian*, July 10, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/10/redheads-die-out-extinction-ginger-gene-bad-science-red-hair>.

<sup>120</sup> Stacey Russell, “Kathy Griffin: You’re an Unfunny Asshole,” *Miami New Times*, August 29, 2010, <http://www.miaminewtimes.com/arts/best-things-to-do-in-miami-this-thanksgiving-weekend-november-24-through-november-26-9848511>.

Kris and Kendall Jenner had “ginger envy,” when they shared a selfie of themselves wearing Griffin’s wigs.<sup>121</sup>

### 3.4.1 Critical studies of comedy

Humor is fundamentally a social phenomenon and people find pleasure in humor when the rules of “serious” communication are broken.<sup>122</sup> Jokes, in particular, are “a brief time off from the everyday inhibitions and restrictions that bind the way we speak.”<sup>123</sup> Christie Davis states that when a number of jokes cohere around a single theme, they can be said to form what Emile Durkheim termed a “social fact,” describing some particular aspect of the society from which they derive, such as values or norms.<sup>124</sup> Like any other communicative practice, jokes are contextual, and depend on the people involved, the setting, power dynamics, and many other factors.<sup>125</sup>

Within the communication field, the three most popular genres of theories used to look at humor are superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory. Superiority theory suggests that people find humor in feeling above or better than other people.<sup>126</sup> The relief theory explains

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<sup>121</sup> Dan Bolles, “Kathy Griffin Talks Comedy, Politics and Anderson Cooper,” *Seven Days*, October 28, 2015, <https://www.sevendaysvt.com/vermont/kathy-griffin-talks-comedy-politics-and-anderson-cooper/Content?oid=2975133>; “Kathy Griffin Accuses Kendall and Kris Jenner of ‘Ginger Envy’ as They Sneakily Try on Her Wigs,” *Boston Herald*, July 17, 2017, [http://www.bostonherald.com/entertainment/people\\_ew/2017/07/kathy\\_griffin\\_accuses\\_kendall\\_and\\_kris\\_jenner\\_of\\_ginger\\_envy\\_as\\_they](http://www.bostonherald.com/entertainment/people_ew/2017/07/kathy_griffin_accuses_kendall_and_kris_jenner_of_ginger_envy_as_they).

<sup>122</sup> Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier, 2007), 5.

<sup>123</sup> Christie Davies, *Jokes and Targets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>126</sup> Jessalyn I. Vallade, Melanie Booth-Butterfield, and Lori E. Vela, “Taking Back Power: Using Superiority Theory to Predict Humor Use Following a Relational Transgression,” *Western Journal of Communication* 77, no. 2 (2013): 232.

that humor results when tension or stress that has built up is let go or reduced.<sup>127</sup> From the perspective of incongruity theory, people find things funny because they are out of place, surprising, or do not align with expectations.<sup>128</sup> All of these theoretical perspectives inform analysis of the ginger phenomenon. The phenomenon reflects the values and norms, or social facts, of white, Western society. The vast array of jokes that come out of the phenomenon can be analyzed by either superiority, relief, incongruity, or some combination of the three.

### 3.4.2 Race and humor

The origins of racial and ethnic humor in the US were feelings of superiority and white racial antagonisms.<sup>129</sup> However, much work has been done on race and humor that shows it has potential for both subversion and reaffirming of racist ideologies. For example, Ji Hoon Park, Nadine G. Gabbadon, and Ariel R. Chernin suggest that comedies that feature racial minority leads may help increase racial tolerance in the US. At the same time, they also note that the most successful comedies often incorporate the most racist stereotypical characters, so the potential for exposure and tolerance is undermined.<sup>130</sup> Critical engagement of such stereotypes is not demanded from audiences in most comedic films, so racial differences may end up being naturalized and validated through humor.<sup>131</sup> Likewise, Raúl Pérez argues that within the realm of

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<sup>127</sup> John C. Meyer, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication," *Communication Theory* 10, no. 3 (2000): 311-2.

<sup>128</sup> Amy Carrell, "Historical Views of Humor," in *The Primer of Humor Research*, ed. Victor Raskin (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 311.

<sup>129</sup> Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson, "Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2008): 81.

<sup>130</sup> Ji Hoon Park, Nadine G. Gabbadon, and Ariel R. Chernin, "Naturalizing Racial Differences Through Comedy: Asian, Black, and White Views on Racial Stereotypes in *Rush Hour 2*," *Journal of Communication* 56, no. 1 (2006): 157-8.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

standup comedy, racial jokes historically have been a “weapon” utilized for liberation for performers of color. However, within the “color-blind,” “post-racial” era, a new racial discourse has been normalized, and some white performers are making racist jokes that previously would have been avoided.<sup>132</sup> Jonathan Rossing, similarly argues that racial humor can be emancipatory and “functions as a vital participant in [the] struggle over knowledge, identity, power relationships, and agency.”<sup>133</sup> Yet to be emancipatory, this humor must be specifically critical of racial oppression; if not, it can turn oppressive itself. Attempting to move beyond the aforementioned subversive/oppressive binary, Rossing ultimately suggests that, due to humor’s complexity and polysemy, it is more productive to think about it on a continuum.<sup>134</sup>

Racial humor in the online sphere deserves special consideration. In these contexts, sarcasm and satire can be misread easily, or missed entirely, if a person does not have enough background knowledge about a particular subject. In their work on racial parody on YouTube, Elaine Chun and Keith Walters suggest that new media can bring people together from different geographical and linguistic backgrounds, to introduce positive representations of often stereotyped groups. Yet, ultimately they found that the videos they studied reinforced essentialist racist ideologies for their viewers.<sup>135</sup> YouTube as a platform, they argue, does not facilitate conversations in the comments sections, so much as it provides ratings, or reviews.<sup>136</sup> Though the recent addition of direct nested responses to comments could potentially help cultivate such

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<sup>132</sup> Raúl Pérez, “Learning to Make Racism Funny in the ‘Color-Blind’ Era: Stand-up Comedy Students, Performance Strategies, and the (Re)production of Racist Jokes in Public,” *Discourse and Society* 24, no. 4 (2013): 498.

<sup>133</sup> Jonathan P. Rossing, “Emancipatory Racial Humor as Critical Public Pedagogy: Subverting Hegemonic Racism,” *Communication, Culture and Critique* 9, no. 4 (2016): 615.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 618.

<sup>135</sup> Elaine Chun and Keith Walters, “Orienting to Arab Orientalisms: Race, Language, and Humor in a YouTube Video,” in *Digital Discourse: Language in the New Media*, ed. Crispin Thurlow and Kristine Mroczek (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 252.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

conversations, it does not appear to have happened yet. Therefore Chun and Walters suggest that it is important to read racially parodic texts at multiple levels and to self-reflect on our own understandings of race and language, as we attempt to interrogate the meanings others make.

### 3.5 CONAN O'BRIEN

Out of all redheaded celebrities, comedian Conan O'Brien perhaps best exemplifies the ginger stereotype and was often referenced by my co-narrators as one of few redheaded media role models for boys. When asked who his media role models were growing up, for example, Andy Haverkamp stated: "We get nothing. We got JFK and Conan O'Brien. And I didn't want to be the funny man and JFK was shot."<sup>137</sup> O'Brien is self-effacing about his looks and his sexual appeal. He is a self-proclaimed nerd. Most importantly, his unusual hair, in both color and style, in addition to his pale skin, are integral to his act. O'Brien's physical features have made him somewhat different from other male actors and comedians since his entrance into the late-night comedy scene in 1993. However, the following examples showcase how O'Brien and his team later took his ambivalent redheadedness and capitalized on the specific formation of the ginger

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<sup>137</sup>Andy Haverkamp, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016. There is disagreement about whether or not JFK was actually a redhead, or had brown hair with reddish tones. Because the ginger phenomenon did not exist in the same way during his time of fame, it is possible that he did have red hair, but it was not automatically assumed a central part of his identity by others. It is also possible that his Irishness led others to read his hair color as red, even if it were more brown. In today's context, JFK's great-nephew, Joseph Kennedy III, congressman from Massachusetts, is consistently described as both a redhead and ginger online. For more, see: Neil Scott, "Red Hair and the Kennedy Family," *The Myths and History of Red Hair*, May 13, 2016; Rick Strandlof, "Joe Kennedy is The Hottest Ginger in Congress," *Buzzfeed*, January 18, 2013, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/ricks15/joe-kennedy-hottest-ginger-in-congress-4cvv?utm\\_term=.xrrp3zPb#.tiLOmPLn](https://www.buzzfeed.com/ricks15/joe-kennedy-hottest-ginger-in-congress-4cvv?utm_term=.xrrp3zPb#.tiLOmPLn); Chris Sweeney, "The Interview: Joe Kennedy III," *Boston Magazine*, September 11, 2016, <http://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2016/09/11/joe-kennedy-iii-interview/>.

meme in order to show familiarity with internet culture and remain relevant with the white youth market. While reviewing O'Brien's social media strategy, I will also analyze online instances of gendered gingerism that circulated widely via social media, such as responses to the "Red Hot" 100 campaign and the Match.com controversy. In addition to offering commentary on these instances in his stand-up acts, by simultaneously embodying the ginger man stereotype, O'Brien also perpetuates them.

### **3.5.1 *Pale Force***

Comedian Jim Gaffigan, while blonde and not redheaded, has also incorporated his extreme paleness into his routine, teaming up with Conan in 2007 for an animated series about their Superhero gang, *Pale Force*. The series of shorts were introduced on Conan's show on NBC and are now hosted on the video site Funnyordie.com, which facilitates sharing via the site's links to social media platforms.<sup>138</sup> The two men "blind" opponents with the reflection of light off of their pale skin and also shoot lasers from their nipples. The series is built around Gaffigan's masculinity subordinating O'Brien's. As I will discuss further in Chapter Five, gingeriness is constructed through its comparisons to both blackness *and* normative whiteness. In the first few episodes, Gaffigan is imitated by Phillip Seymour Hoffman, who tries to turn everyone against the real Pale Force team. He spreads a rumor that O'Brien has gonorrhea. The next day, newspaper headlines read "Conan's Had Sex?" rather than stating that he has a sexually transmitted disease. Gaffigan, who generally does not effect a masculine persona in interviews nor in his comedy acts, nevertheless here gives himself a deep voice and muscles in the cartoon

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<sup>138</sup> *Pale Force*, directed by Paul Noth, written and produced by Jim Gaffigan (2005–2008; New York: New Video Group, 2009), DVD, <http://www.funnyordie.com/paleforce>.

world, while O'Brien has a very high voice and is extremely skinny. We are told that O'Brien is "unable to grow body hair," and has "ambiguous genitalia." O'Brien's physical appearance is thus depicted as incommensurable with the ideals of hegemonic adult masculinity. O'Brien has always talked about his hair and skin as humorous, unusual physical characteristics from the beginning of his talk show career in 1993, through his collaboration with Gaffigan in 2007, and beyond. However, it was not until after his transition from NBC to TBS and the latter network's embracing of new media marketing and youth internet culture in 2010, that he began to fully participate in the ginger meme.

### 3.5.2 Conan's social media campaign

From 2009 through 2010, Conan O'Brien and Jay Leno's alleged feud over *The Tonight Show* was widely reported by major online news outlets. The *Huffington Post* framed it as the "Conan/Leno drama" and the *Washington Post* termed it the "Leno/O'Brien fiasco."<sup>139</sup> Contracts signed in September 2004 stated that in 2009, Leno would retire and O'Brien would become the new host of *The Tonight Show*.<sup>140</sup> As the date neared, Leno reportedly did not want to leave his position as host of *The Tonight Show*.<sup>141</sup> As a compromise, NBC offered Leno a ten o'clock nightly spot, which he accepted.<sup>142</sup> O'Brien officially took over as host of *The Tonight Show* on

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<sup>139</sup> Katla McGlynn, "Everything You Need To Know About The Conan/Leno Drama In One Easy Post," *Huffington Post*, March 18, 2010, <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/13/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-conan-leno-drama-in-one-easy-post>; Tom Shales, "Tom Shales on the Villains in the Leno-O'Brien Fiasco at NBC," *Washington Post*, January 19, 2010

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/01/18/AR2010011803528.html>.

<sup>140</sup> Bill Carter, *The War for Late Night: When Leno Went Early and Television Went Crazy* (New York: Penguin Group, 2010), 52.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 156-7.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.



June 1, 2009.<sup>143</sup> Within a few months, neither Leno nor O'Brien's shows were doing as well as the network wanted in terms of ratings. Significantly, Conan had lowered the average age of *The Tonight Show*'s viewers by almost a decade. He had a younger fan base, who entertainment journalist Bill Carter suggests, "watched his bits online," instead of during the show's initial airing.<sup>144</sup> NBC, however, wanted O'Brien to have a broader appeal. At the same time, Leno's show was failing and affiliates were threatening to pull the program because it was a poor lead-in for the nightly news.<sup>145</sup> The final proposed resolution was that Leno would have a half hour spot at 11.35 pm and O'Brien would have an hour-long show at 12.05 am. In the end, after much contract negotiation and negative press from all sides, O'Brien decided to leave NBC. Most press commentary sided with O'Brien, suggesting that Leno was greedy and should have walked from the time slot or the network all together.<sup>146</sup>

O'Brien was also supported in his decision to leave NBC by his growing online fan base. Fans began to show support through a variety of social media platforms, including Facebook, where the page "I'm with Coco" and its off-shoots originated, as well as on Twitter, where the hashtag #TeamCoco circulated widely. The name "Coco," as a diminutive for Conan, came from an early sketch on O'Brien's version of *The Tonight Show*, and was subsequently popularized by Tom Hanks when he appeared on the show as a guest.<sup>147</sup> In addition to providing virtual support, fans also planned and gathered for in-person rallies across the United States, in support of

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<sup>143</sup> Lynn Hirschberg, "Heeere's . . . Conan!!!," *New York Times Magazine*, May 20, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/24/magazine/24Conan-t.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>144</sup> Carter, *The War for Late Night*, 197.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 264; Joe Flint, "Jay Leno's New Time Slot Wreaks Havoc for NBC Affiliates," *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 2009, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/oct/19/business/fi-ct-nbc-affils19>.

<sup>146</sup> Carter, *The War for Late Night*, 310.

<sup>147</sup> "June Highlights," *The Tonight Show with Conan O'Brien*, archived at, <https://web.archive.org/web/20090706084046/http://www.tonightshowwithconanobrien.com/video/clips/twitter-tracker-060209/1116881>.

O'Brien.<sup>148</sup> Online audience response to O'Brien's alleged poor treatment sometimes invoked his hair color, both as a joke, and as an actual concern. For example, the satirical blog "Stuff White People Like," offered support of Conan, while suggesting that he is of course a person that "white people like" because he embodies so many aspects of whiteness such as, "Ivy League Schools, Red Hair, the Boston Red Sox," amongst other things.<sup>149</sup> "Stuff White People Like" (which is no longer updated) is a contemporary example to the ginger phenomenon that also Othered whiteness online. Shana Walton and Alexandra Jaffe suggest that the site uses humor to create a non-threatening space in which to discuss race and class. At the same time, however, the site can also confirm white privilege, instead of undermining it, because it offers readers "the potential to align with a humorous reflexivity that insulates them as potential targets of real critique."<sup>150</sup> The ginger phenomenon, especially as it exists through O'Brien, may do the same.

Soon after he left NBC, O'Brien created his own Twitter account, which gained one million followers in just three months.<sup>151</sup> It was also via Twitter that he made his first public comments after leaving *The Tonight Show*.<sup>152</sup> During this time, as part of his negotiations with NBC, O'Brien was not allowed to appear on television. Social media, along with his "Legally Prohibited from Being Funny on Television" comedy tour, maintained O'Brien's public presence

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<sup>148</sup> Monica Guzman, "Seattle Conan Fans to Rally at Westlake Center," *Seattle PI*, January 18, 2010, <http://blog.seattlepi.com/thebigblog/2010/01/18/seattle-conan-fans-to-rally-at-westlake-center>.

<sup>149</sup> Christian Lander, "#131 Conan O'Brien," *Stuff White People Like*, January 13, 2010, <https://stuffwhitepeoplelike.com/2010/01/13/130-conan-obrien/>.

<sup>150</sup> Shana Walton and Alexandra Jaffe, "'Stuff White People Like': Stance, Class, Race, and Internet Commentary," in Thurlow and Mroczek, *Digital Discourse*, 200.

<sup>151</sup> Ann Oldenburg, "Tweet This: Conan Reaches 1 Million; Britney Overtakes Ashton," *USA Today*, May 25, 2010, <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/entertainment/post/2010/05/tweet-this-conan-reaches-1-million-britney-overtakes-ashton-/1#.Wh8ZVrQ-eu4>.

<sup>152</sup> Rob Manker, "Conan, Ozzie and the Dalai Lama: Together on Twitter," *Chicago Tribune*, February 26, 2010, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-02-26/opinion/ct-talk-celebrities-on-twitter-0226-20100225\\_1\\_dalai-lama-buddhist-leader-conan-o-brien](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-02-26/opinion/ct-talk-celebrities-on-twitter-0226-20100225_1_dalai-lama-buddhist-leader-conan-o-brien).

during his TV ban. Following the creation of O'Brien's Twitter account and immediate appeal, reporter Chris Matyszczyk of CNET correctly predicted, "Who could fail to imagine that this is merely the first step in a vast socially networked marketing campaign?"<sup>153</sup> In April, O'Brien and his team signed a deal with the cable network TBS, a channel especially strong with the young male demographic, a group with which O'Brien also scored well.<sup>154</sup> O'Brien's new network capitalized on what had appeared to be a spontaneous online social movement in support of O'Brien. They launched their own full-scale social media campaign, grouped under the Team Coco heading.<sup>155</sup> The campaign was so successful that it is now used as a case study in a social media marketing textbook.<sup>156</sup> Numerous marketing professionals have hailed it as exemplary, calling it, for instance, "a brilliant launch campaign that incorporated social media better than I've ever seen."<sup>157</sup> As part of its incorporation of social media as a key element of the show's rebranding, O'Brien's team further familiarized themselves with popular internet culture and began making explicit references to viral content. As such, the show soon reemphasized O'Brien's hair color, already viewed as quirky, and explicitly positioned him as a ginger, thus participating in the ginger meme.

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<sup>153</sup> Chris Matyszczyk, "Conan Joins Twitter, Beats Leno in Hours," *CNET*, February 24, 2010, <https://www.cnet.com/news/conan-joins-twitter-beats-leno-in-hours/>.

<sup>154</sup> Carter, *The War for Late Night*, 377.

<sup>155</sup> Austin Carr, "Team Coco Head Talks Conan O'Brien, Social Media, Crowdsourcing his First Guest," *Fast Company*, October 2010, <https://www.fastcompany.com/1696587/team-coco-head-talks-conan-obrien-social-media-crowdsourcing-his-first-guest>.

<sup>156</sup> Melissa Barker and Donald I. Barker, *Social Media Marketing: A Strategic Approach*, 1st ed. (Mason, OH: Cengage Learning, 2013), 273-6.

<sup>157</sup> Nellie Andreeva, "UPDATE: 4.2 Million Watch Conan's Debut which Beats Leno, Letterman, Stewart & Colbert," *Deadline*, November 9, 2010, <http://deadline.com/2010/11/what-ratings-levels-would-make-conan-a-success-82554>.

### 3.5.3 Conan's embrace of the ginger meme

The majority of O'Brien's ginger jokes rely on the fact that redheaded men are excluded from some of the qualities associated with hegemonic white masculinity, especially, heterosexual prowess and physical strength. On December 17, 2013, during his opening monologue, O'Brien referenced an unnamed study, saying, "A new study claims that redheaded women are sexually desirable, but redheaded men are not. I wouldn't have minded, but the study mentioned me by name."<sup>158</sup> O'Brien continued this pattern, on January 13, 2015, sharing that, "Yesterday was National Kiss a Ginger Day. Yeah, and for some reason, nobody told me about it until today."<sup>159</sup> Similarly, on November 14, 2014, he quipped, "I'm a huge fan of *Sons of Anarchy*, probably because when I was a young man, I ran with a gang of redheaded punks. We were called The Ginger Snaps. Our biggest enemy was sunlight."<sup>160</sup> The idea that having very fair skin excludes a man from masculine activities typically performed outdoors was also a theme that came up in my oral history interviews. For example, Andy Haverkamp shared that, "you can't be the tough outdoorsy hiker type. I've tried it; it's sunburn-city! Like, you just can't do the macho thing, it just doesn't work."<sup>161</sup> Dan Wallace also explained that, "it does suck sometimes, because a lot of jobs that I would want to do [such as landscaping] are more based-outside. I'd obviously have problems doing [them] because your skin, melanoma—it's gonna kill ya."<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> "Jokes," December 17, 2013, <http://teamcoco.com/jokes/dec-17-2013-a-new-study-claims-that-red-headed-women-are-sexually-desirable-but-red-headed-men-are-not-i-wouldn-t-have-mind>.

<sup>159</sup> "Jokes," January 13, 2015, <http://teamcoco.com/jokes/january-13-2015-yesterday-was-national-kiss-a-ginger-day-for-some-reason-nobody-told-me-about-it-until-today>.

<sup>160</sup> "Jokes," November 11, 2014, <http://teamcoco.com/jokes/november-11-2014-i-m-a-huge-fan-of-sons-of-anarchy-probably-because-when-i-was-a-young-man-i-ran-with-a-gang-of-redheaded>.

<sup>161</sup> Andy Haverkamp, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>162</sup> Dan Wallace, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Winthrop, MA, July 9, 2016.

### 3.5.4 Red Hot 100

During the period in which O'Brien's show began paying attention to the ginger meme, an intriguing story about redheaded men circulated online. In response to stereotypes about redheaded men being geeky, effeminate, and grotesque, photographer Thomas Knights created a photo exhibition featuring highly sexualized redheaded male models, with stereotypically attractive masculine bodies. The exhibition, entitled *Red Hot 100* aimed to “create the image of a positive role model for ginger men because there's a serious lack of them.”<sup>163</sup> Knights explained, “Red haired men are never heroes or the leading man, never the alpha male, or portrayed as sexual. They seem to emasculate and desexualise guys with ginger hair. There is an institutionalised stigma prevalent in the UK especially.”<sup>164</sup> Knights' comments explicitly position ginger masculinity as yearning to access the power promised by hegemonic masculinity. Knights further commented that, “It's just like any other form of prejudice—being anti-ginger is like one of the last acceptable forms of racism left in our society,” positing that, “it's a hangover from the war with the Scots about 500 years ago where negative attention was turned to their red hair and now it's stuck.”<sup>165</sup> Like many invested in promoting the idea that gingerism is a serious offense, Knights suggests that the discrimination takes a more serious formation in the UK than in the US, and frames it as racism. However, as Joanne Garde-Hansen and Kristyn Gorton show, with the internet, affects are now easily globally shared, so the distinctions between gingerism in

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<sup>163</sup> Lucy Waterlow, “Rebranding Redheads: Fashion Photographer Celebrates Ginger Men with Exhibition Showing They Can Be Heroic and Sexy,” *Daily Mail*, November 11, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2499953/Rebranding-redheads-Fashion-photographer-celebrates-ginger-men-exhibition-showing-heroic-sexy.html>.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

the UK and the US, as well as in Canada and Australia, may be lost.<sup>166</sup> In fact, there is little consistency when people, even those heavily involved in the ginger pride movement, talk about these distinctions, or lack thereof. Some people report that the problem does not exist in the US, while others state that it is especially bad there. Additionally, when people share image macros, listicles, popular news articles, or short videos, they do not always contextualize them in terms of nation or culture. In this case, for example, press releases for popular news articles about the exhibition were widely shared online, through mainstream media, as well as individuals' social media accounts. Even though the projects began in England, they have been covered in press from all over the Western world.<sup>167</sup> Additionally, perhaps due to the "sensationalist" nature of the topic and the images, many readers expressed their opinions in the comments sections, and thus engaged in the international transmission of affects across popular news sites.

It is interesting that Knights's attempt to rebrand ginger men as hypermasculine took the route of hypersexualizing them, because this is something most often done to women. In fact,

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<sup>166</sup> Joanne Garde-Hansen and Kristyn Gorton, "Introduction," in *Emotion Online: Theorizing Affect on the Internet* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1–28.

<sup>167</sup> See, for example: from the US, Michelle Ruzzene, "Photographer Out to Prove Red Heads Can Be Sexy Too," *Yahoo*, September 1, 2014, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/phoographer-prove-red-heads-sexy-001711080.html>, from Ireland; Danielle Reynolds, Red Alert: Irish Computer Whiz Strips Off for Sexy Calendar in Anti-Bullying Drive to Promote Ginger Pride," *The Sun*, November 5, 2017, <https://www.thesun.ie/news/1763849/irish-computer-whiz-strips-off-for-sexy-calendar-in-anti-bullying-drive-to-promote-ginger-pride>; from France: "Red Hot : An Interview with Photographer Thomas Knights," *Alerte Rousse*, November 2, 2014, <http://alerterousse.com/en/red-hot-an-interview-with-photographer-thomas-knights>; from Scotland, Rachel Guy, "Calling All Gingers: Nude Calendar 'Red Hot C\*\*ks' Needs Sexy Men with Ginger Pubic Hair to Model," *The Scottish Sun*, September 22, 2017, <https://www.thescottishsun.co.uk/news/scottish-news/1601185/nude-calendar-red-hot-cks-needs-sexy-men-with-ginger-pubic-hair-to-model/>; from Canada, Dana Oliver, "Celebrity Hairstylist Vernon François on Being a Black Man With Red Hair and Freckles," *Yahoo News Canada*, May 4, 2017, <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/think-twice-calling-redhead-ginger-120002985.html>; from Australia, Eryk Bagshaw, "Red Hot Red Heads Come to Sydney," *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 30, 2014.

hypersexualizing redheaded men potentially further effeminizes them. As previously described, redheaded women are feminized by virtue of being hypersexualized, and redheaded men are also feminized, by virtue of being made weak. Attempts to counteract weakness are made by showing extremely muscular bodies. However, these depictions also have the effect of sexualizing the men. Perhaps this is why the project was not measurably successful, despite articles that made proclamations like, “social media saved the ginger male.”<sup>168</sup>

### 3.5.5 Conan’s take on Red Hot 100

On October 3, 2013, O’Brien spoofed the Red Hot 100 campaign. In his set up to the viral video, O’Brien shares, “In Great Britain, redheads—in Great Britain they’re called gingers, are often made fun of [laughter from the audience]. I was shocked to find this out. There’s actually a stigma attached to gingers.” (Though in this clip O’Brien claims to have been “shocked” by the news that gingers are looked down upon in England, he referenced the phenomenon in the US as early as 2011, joking that, “This week, ABC News did a big report on “ginger abuse,” a form of bullying directed at people with red hair. Unfortunately, I missed it because my camera men were giving me a wedgie”).<sup>169</sup> He goes on to describe Thomas Knights’s project and tells the audience to check out the new video advertisement for exhibit, which aims to show redheaded men as “sexy.” The video, which is intercut with real footage from the Red Hot 100 campaign, begins with the words “Red Hot” in white font on a black background. It then proceeds to show

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<sup>168</sup> Rhiannon Williams, “Red Hot: How Social Media Saved the Ginger Male - and Is Now Coming for Your Women,” *The Telegraph*, December 14, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/social-media/11294290/RED-HOT-how-social-media-saved-the-ginger-male-and-is-now-coming-for-your-women.html>.

<sup>169</sup> “Jokes,” February 24, 2011, <http://teamcoco.com/jokes/feb-24-2011-this-week-abc-news-did-a-big-report-on-ginger-abuse-a-form>.

several young models from the photography exhibit who are shirtless and posed in front of brightly colored backgrounds, staring and blinking at the camera, tousling their hair, or looking bored. In other words, they are behaving as typical models. Conan appears as the fourth model, against a bright orange background. Orange, importantly, is a color avoided by many redheads, for fear of clashing. It is not considered complementary to their hair or the stereotyped light skin with freckles.<sup>170</sup> Conan is noticeably older than the rest of the men who appear in the video. Additionally, he incorporates a series of props, parodying sexy model behavior, which turns grotesque for comedic effect. For example, he messily bites into a long sub, making coy eyes at the audience. Likewise, he “sensually” licks a red lollipop. Finally, he sips a frappe from a red straw, while again making exaggerated eye contact with the audience. However, this bit stops short when he develops “brain freeze” and can’t drink any more of the frozen treat.

In this short parody video, Conan points to two central claims about redheadedness and gender. First, by parodying tropes of femininity in advertising, he suggests that “sexiness” is a quality that cannot be performed by redheaded men, contrary to what Knights’ campaign aims to show. Secondly, in addition to failing at performances of femininity, he also fails at a performance of masculinity and toughness, when the ice cream is too cold for him. Upon taking a bite, he grasps at his head and winces in pain. Again, this performance is contrary to Knights’ goal of rebranding redheaded men as tough and reinforces my claim that ginger men are an exemplar of failed masculinity.

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<sup>170</sup> Elisabeth Ness, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Crosshaven, Ireland, August 22, 2015.



### 3.5.6 Match.com controversy

On April 12, 2016, O'Brien again referenced a viral social media story, one in which a corporation was accused of "gingerism" by bloggers and others in the ginger pride community. The dating website, Match.com, released a billboard campaign in London featuring an extreme close-up picture of a woman with red hair and many freckles that read, "If you don't like your imperfections, someone else will."<sup>171</sup> The day after the billboard made headlines, Conan quipped, "The new ad campaign for Match.com refers to red hair and freckles as 'imperfections.' That's why for years, women have been asking me if the carpet is as imperfect as the drapes."<sup>172</sup> Though the question, "does the carpet match the drapes" is a well-known joke made towards redheaded people, many women I interviewed complained about it and recognized it as an early form of sexual harassment associated with their hair color. For example, Kari Yon remembered that, during "high school [teasing] changes because instead of them talking about the hair on your head, they start talking about the hair between your legs, and so then you get a lot of 'fire crotch' and stuff."<sup>173</sup> Lindsay Chandler specifically remembered being asked, "does the curtain match the drapes?"<sup>174</sup> when she was in high school. Eva Kenworthy had a similar experience: "when I was in 6th grade, one of the guys in my class asked me if I had red pubic hair and it was

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<sup>171</sup> Elena Cresci, "Match.com to Remove Posters Implying Red Hair and Freckles 'Imperfections,'" *Guardian*, April 12, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/apr/12/matchcom-to-remove-posters-implying-red-hair-and-freckles-imperfections>.

<sup>172</sup> "Jokes," April 12, 2016, <http://teamcoco.com/jokes/april-12-2016-the-new-ad-campaign-for-match-com-refers-to-red-hair-and-freckles-as-imperfections-that-s-why-for-years-women-have-been-asking-me-if-the-carpet-is-as-imperfect-as-the-drapes>.

<sup>173</sup> Kari Yon, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>174</sup> Lindsay Chandler, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

really inappropriate. Nobody is asking anybody else that, right?”<sup>175</sup> Notably, all three women mentioned that it was only male classmates who made these comments to them.

In this example, O’Brien jokes about something that was actually traumatic for some of the women I interviewed. In his monologue, he further demasculinizes himself by reporting that he is asked a question typically meant to embarrass women. Even though ginger men are desexualized and redheaded women at times are hypersexualized, it is not necessarily “better” to be a redheaded woman, as popular discourses online suggest. From their positions of power, men sexualized these women early on, which the women interpreted as demeaning, not as complimentary. Similar to the comments from Luke and Andy in the *Redhead Versus Ginger* section above, from O’Brien’s perspective as a ginger man, being sexually desirable is an unembodiable characteristic and therefore a position that he desires. For these women, in contrast, their sexualization by others from a young age was troubling and potentially dehumanizing.<sup>176</sup>

### 3.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I argued that gender is a central component of the ginger stereotype. By analyzing how discourses of gender have constructed the ginger as socially different, I have shown that the negative aspects of whiteness that are scapegoated by the ginger phenomenon are those that undermine white masculinity’s power. Through the lens of gender polarity, I have shown that both men and women with red hair are subjected to feminization. Despite their masculine subject positions, redheaded men are subordinated in some ways. However, their

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<sup>175</sup> Eva Kennworthy, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>176</sup> Jeroen Vaes, Paola Paladino, and Elisa Puvia, “Are Sexualized Women Complete Human Beings? Why Men and Women Dehumanize Sexually Objectified Women,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 41, no. 6 (2011): 774.

white nerd masculinities, on the one hand, are complex and contradictory, and viewing them as passive victims can undermine their misogynistic behaviors. Redheaded women, on the other hand, are subjected to a binary in which they are either hypersexualized, as was the case during historic film depictions, or totally desexualized and labeled grotesque like ginger men, as is increasingly the case during the social media proliferation of the new ginger type. This transition has taken place alongside changing beauty ideals, including the valorization of a slightly darker tanned white skin, which reflects marketing to a gradually diversifying racial demographic.

Much of the discourse surrounding gingers, and particularly that discourse which invokes gender as a central theme, is couched in humor. Humor is a cultural practice that reveals social values and norms. Humor has the potential to be subversive, but can also reinforce dominant ideologies, as often happens with racial humor. Memes and viral videos are examples of humorous ginger texts in which discourses of demasculization and hypersexualization spread. Such texts reaffirm gendered stereotypes about redheaded people. The gendered aspects of the ginger phenomenon have also been introduced into mainstream mass media by redheaded comedians like Conan O'Brien. As a case study, O'Brien's journey from ambivalently-perceived redhead to embodiment of the ginger type shows how the new form and perpetuation of the ginger type is specifically tied to its life on social media. In the next chapter, I will continue to show how the ginger's construction is reliant on social media through discourses of science, which spread misinformation about genetics through forms like news stories and listicles.

#### 4.0 THE SCIENCE OF GINGERS

The modern world sees DNA as that which makes a person fundamentally different from another person, and groups of people who share its patterns, different from other groups. The constructed infallibility of DNA as an identity determinant has resulted in many people seeing it as an “arbiter of truth” in, for example, cases about uncovering a person’s “true” racial or ethnic identity, or one’s likelihood of developing particular diseases.<sup>1</sup> Genetic explanations for illnesses and behaviors are given priority over other kinds of explanations, such as environmental factors.<sup>2</sup> The reliance on DNA as truth-teller is the result of a strong cultural belief in genetic essentialism, or “the tendency to infer a person’s characteristics and behaviors from his or her perceived genetic makeup.”<sup>3</sup> People taking an essentialist view of genetics understand genes as immutable, fundamental, homogeneous, discrete, and natural.<sup>4</sup> This reductive understanding of genes circulates in the public mass-mediated discourse, amplifying genetic essentialism.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, red hair has been increasingly viewed as a biological difference that owes to a genetic mutation. This perception results largely from scientific and social scientific studies that are translated into popular news in a simplified way, that reproduce, at best, only partial truths. Because popular online news follows the multimodal logic of memetics, these partial

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<sup>1</sup> Alondra Nelson, *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2016), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ilan Dar-Nimrod and Steven J. Heine, “Genetic Essentialism: On the Deceptive Determinism of DNA,” *Psychological Bulletin* 137, no. 5 (2011): 803.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 802.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 801.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 800.

truths circulate and recirculate through other viral media, like short news articles, videos, and listicles.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter, I argue that red hair is pathologized. Discourses that position red hair as a genetic mutation legitimize and reinscribe red hair as a *biological* difference, which, because of the authority given to science in the modern world, is interpreted as a “true” difference. The biological explanation for red hair gives weight to redheaded people’s perceived *social* differences, such as weakness (in men) and hypersexuality (in women), and overall strangeness. When scientific research is translated into press bulletins, context, specificity, and intent are often lost, and press coverage tends to focus on cultural implications of whatever “breakthrough” is reported, rather than the actual scientific findings.<sup>7</sup> In this case, popular press and social media coverage of red hair science participate in the ginger meme, relying on sensationalism and stereotypes, while misrepresenting scientific studies.

In what follows I will first review the literature on discourses of DNA and genetic science in popular culture. Next, I will introduce some of the popular discourses about redheaded science through my own experience and interviews with narrators at the 2016 Redhead Event in Portland, Oregon. From here, I will further analyze the idea of the “ginger gene,” and look at a case study of the MC1R DNA test. Having presented the major discourses about red hair and genetics, I will then consider the emergence of the listicle (articles in list form) format, which promotes sharing “ginger facts” via social media. I will also share my narrators’ experiences encountering such listicles and other stories of red hair science online. Finally, I will conclude

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<sup>6</sup> Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 135.

<sup>7</sup> Nelly Oodshourn, “On Masculinities, Technologies, and Pain: The Testing of Male Contraceptives in the Clinic and the Media,” *Science, Technologies, and Human Values* 24, no. 2 (1999): 276; 281.

this chapter with a comparison of the popular online discourses of red hair genetics with the original scientific studies from which they have typically become disassociated. By the end of this chapter I will have shown how genetic science and its circulation via both mass and social media are implicated in the ginger's construction as Other.

#### 4.1 DNA'S SOCIAL LIFE

DNA has both a social life and a social power.<sup>8</sup> Following Arjun Appadurai's work in *The Social Life of Things*, Alondra Nelson argues that DNA's social life (the way in which humans circulate discourses and artifacts related to DNA) must be traced in order to understand why genetic science is seen as potentially yielding answers to fundamental questions about human existence.<sup>9</sup> Within modern culture, DNA has developed a social status as "the final arbiter of truth of identity."<sup>10</sup> DNA is fundamental to the reification of identities such as race, ethnicity, and predisposition to illness. These "amorphous and contested social categories" are turned into "things" when scientists assert that they have a genetic basis.<sup>11</sup> Science, in general, and genetic science in particular, have an "imprimatur" of authority, such that genetic explanations eclipse environmental and social explanations for phenomena like illness-propensity, within the public discourse.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Nelson, *The Social Life of DNA*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Kimmelman, "The Post-Human Genome Project Mindset: Race, Reliability, and Health Care," *Clinical Genetics* 70, no. 5 (2006): 428.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 429.

In the early years of research in human genetics, prior to the completion of the Human Genome Project, there was great optimism about genes' predictive power. Genes were perceived as having "almost a magical force,"<sup>13</sup> due to the idea that health "enemies" resided in genes and could be fought, if only they were better understood.<sup>14</sup> In addition to solving medical problems, genes were also viewed as "ultimate" solutions for unwanted behavioral conditions.<sup>15</sup> The idea of direct relationships between genes and conditions was attractive to pharmaceutical companies, as well.<sup>16</sup> However, in the years following the Human Genome Project's completion, it became clear that the answers would not be so simple. Weak genetic associations, meaning that there is a genetic basis for a condition, but details about how it transmits are unknown, turned out to be much more common than strong genetic associations.<sup>17</sup> Even when there are so-called strong genetic connections, they're typically "complicated, probabilistic, and contingent," rather than direct, observed relationships between a gene and a particular outcome.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, usually multiple genes, not just one, are involved in identified conditions.<sup>19</sup> Overall, the translation of genetic discoveries and innovations into treatments for diseases has not lived up to its promise.<sup>20</sup>

Though advancements in genetic science have not led to the level of medical benefits originally intended, there have been varied cultural implications, many of which were unimagined prior to the research's completion. Genetic innovations have, for example, enabled

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<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Nelkin and M. Susan Lindee, *The DNA Mystique: The Gene as a Cultural Icon* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 2004): 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 427.

<sup>15</sup> Michael J. Montoya, *Making the Mexican Diabetic: Race, Science, and the Genetics of Inequality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>17</sup> Dar-Nimrod and Heine, "Genetic Essentialism," 802-3.

<sup>18</sup> Kimmelman, "The Post-Human Genome Project Mindset," 430.

<sup>19</sup> Dar-Nimrod and Heine, "Genetic Essentialism," 802.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

some societal reconciliation projects, such as reuniting families torn apart during Argentina's period of military dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s, and creating stronger arguments for slavery reparations for African Americans.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, however, they have also risked resurrecting racial hierarchies.<sup>22</sup> For many years, scientists in medical fields worked with archaic racial typologies developed during the times of racial pseudoscience. After World War II, most scientists recognized the problematic and inaccurate nature of discrete racial categories and hierarchies, and began to move away from these groupings. Rather than abandoning them entirely, however, scientists reframed these categories through the lens of "populations."<sup>23</sup>

Building upon Lisa Gannett's work on race and genetics, Alexandra Minna Stern insists that the transition from "races" to "populations" was not a neutral scientific pursuit, but in many ways represents genetic science's longstanding reliance on and perpetuation of racial categories. When the practice of population genetics was developed, "races were reconceptualized as populations" through a statistical lens, wherein a person from a particular population is not *predetermined* to have the traits associated with that population, but is *likely* to have them.<sup>24</sup> The initial results of the Human Genome Project in 2001<sup>25</sup> again publicly confirmed the arguments of critical cultural scholars who had long argued that race was a social construction. Nevertheless, once it was established that human beings were overall remarkably similar in terms of their

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<sup>21</sup> Nelson, *The Social Life of DNA*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>23</sup> Lisa Gannett, "Racism, and Human Genome Diversity Research: The Ethical Limits of 'Population Thinking,'" *Philosophy of Science* 68, no. 3 (2001): 479-92; Alexandra Minna Stern, *Telling Genes: The Story of Genetic Counseling in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 55.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> The NHGRI released 90 percent of the results in 2001, and the rest in 2003 when the project was considered "complete." "A Brief History of the Human Genome Project," *National Human Genome Research Institute*, 2012, <https://www.genome.gov/12011239/a-brief-history-of-the-human-genome-project>.



genetic makeup, scientists made further use of population genetics to investigate the small differences that remained. Medical researchers now argue that these frames are not intended to bring back biological racial categorizations and hierarchies, but rather are the most effective way currently available to compare genetic variants across (relatively) homogenous groups.<sup>26</sup>

Though they are often presented as purely technical, systems that classify people, such as genetic maps, are always implicated in social and political struggles. Classification schema become naturalized and taken for granted, and are thus difficult to recognize.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, while the classification of racial groups through genetic research has purported intents other than resurrecting racial hierarchies, it is still important to consider the inadvertent consequences of such classifications. Perhaps most importantly, these classifications cannot be one hundred percent accurate. Because there are no stable nor “pure” definitions of race, genetic researchers often rely on individuals’ self-reported social identities to create samples of what they assume to be relatively homogenous biological identities.<sup>28</sup> Mistaking a social group for a biological one obscures the economic, cultural, or environmental factors that may lead to higher incidences of diseases or conditions, in particular groups of people.<sup>29</sup>

Another concern that results from classifying race and ethnicity through genetics is the over-association of particular diseases with groups of people. Michael Montoya warns that studying populations in this way can lead to the “social identities and life conditions” of a group of DNA donors being “grafted onto the biological explanations of disease causality”—what he

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<sup>26</sup> Montoya, “Bioethnic Conscription,” 98.

<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 196.

<sup>28</sup> Morris W. Foster and Richard R. Sharp, “Race, Ethnicity, and Genomics: Social Classifications as Proxies of Biological Heterogeneity,” *Genome Research* 12, no. 6 (2002): 845.

<sup>29</sup> Dar-Nimrod and Heine, “Genetic Essentialism,” 813-14.

terms “bioethnic conscription.”<sup>30</sup> Bioethnic conscription takes place when *descriptions* of specific populations (as they are labeled for testing purposes) are conflated with *attributes* of those populations (qualities assigned to the group), resulting in the pathologization of ethnoracial groups.<sup>31</sup> Montoya describes, for example, how Mexican people have been bioethnically conscripted with type 2 diabetes. In the search for a genetic susceptibility for diabetes, researchers needed both a relatively homogenous group (genetically) and a group that included family members. The research that Montoya analyzed used DNA from a group of Mexican and Mexican American people living in an extremely impoverished area of Texas, where rates of diabetes were especially high.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the research process, several problems led to bioethnic conscription. First, this population’s high rate of diabetes had already been determined to be caused by poverty and lack of access to health care—not their ethnicity.<sup>33</sup> Second, though researchers were attempting to make a universal claim about human genetics and diabetes, the academic journal in which they published their work required them to label the sample as Mexican American. Third, based on research like this, diabetes became represented as an ethnoracial disease in press.<sup>34</sup> Mainstream media stories about diabetes almost always point out that rates of disease are higher amongst black and Latino populations, than they are in the white population.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, drug therapies for type 2 diabetes are targeted to people of color.<sup>36</sup> Again, creating drugs for ethnoracial groups who are also subjected to social and economic

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Montoya: “Bioethnic Conscription: Genes, Race, and Mexicana/o Ethnicity in Diabetes Research,” *Cultural Anthropology* 22, no. 1 (2007): 94.

<sup>31</sup> Montoya, *Making the Mexican Diabetic*, 184.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-108.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-4.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

injustice makes it seem like the cause of the disease is biological, rather than also influenced by these disparities.<sup>37</sup>

While gingers are not a race of people, they do stand in for understandings of race and whiteness, and are subjected to a kind of pseudoracialization, as will be discussed further in Chapter Five. With the recent influx of social and mass media content about MC1R gene mutations and their effects, redheaded people can be said to have been bioethnically conscripted with diseases such as melanoma. A “population” of red haired people is as constructed as a population of a pseudo-ethnoracial group, and a number of diseases associated with the MC1R gene are attributed to them.

#### **4.1.1 Ancestral DNA testing**

Soon after the completion of the Human Genome Project, DNA promised to help find people’s ancestral origins. It was viewed as “the ultimate identification evidence.”<sup>38</sup> Most ancestral DNA testing companies use a process known as AIMS (Ancestral Informative Markers) to test for the frequency of particular genetic markers (single nucleotide polymorphisms) in clients. Clients’ frequencies of markers are then compared with the rates of frequency in sample populations. Troy Duster argues that one of the major ways in which for-profit ancestral DNA testing has gained cultural legitimacy is that “computer-generated data provide an appearance of precision that is dangerously seductive and equally misleading.”<sup>39</sup> Despite the depictions of individualized

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<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Kahn, “From Disparity to Difference: How Race-Specific Medicines May Undermine Polices to Address Inequalities in Health Care,” *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* 15, no. 105 (2005): 125.

<sup>38</sup> Aronson, “Certainty vs. Finality,” 127.

<sup>39</sup> Troy Duster, “Ancestry Testing and DNA: Uses, Limits—and Caveat Emptor,” in *Race and the Genetic Revolution: Science, Myth, and Culture*, ed. Sheldon Krimsky and Kathleen Sloan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 8.

data that consumers receive, AIMS are overwhelmingly shared across all human groups; the vast majority of markers are not population specific.<sup>40</sup> Because DNA testing companies have proprietary interests, they do not share the characteristics of their sample populations, nor how they have collected and delimited their samples. Additionally, the industry is unregulated. Much like the constructed nature of ethnoracial groupings in genetic research, marketing of AIMS testing relies on the false idea of one hundred percent purity of racial and ethnic groups, “a condition that could never have existed in human population,” and certainly does not exist now in an age of globalization and mass migration.<sup>41</sup> In order to say someone is, for example, fifty percent European, one needs to know who is one hundred percent European, which is impossible. Duster argues that,

Any molecular, population, or behavioral geneticist who uses the term “percent European,” or “percent Native American” is obliged to disclose that the measuring point of this ‘purity’ (100 percent) is a statistical artifact that belongs not with the DNA, but with a researcher’s adopting the folk categories of race and ethnicity.<sup>42</sup>

Despite such critique, these tests are increasingly popular (if also increasingly controversial).

The results consumers receive from their tests can have both psychological and material effects. Psychologically, trauma can result from learning that a person is not associated with a particular group with which they have built a strong personal identification.<sup>43</sup> Henry Louis Gates, for example, who has hosted two television shows premised on finding people’s ancestral roots, received varying personal results from different companies over a short time period. The first company told him he had Nubian roots in Africa. The second company suggested he had many

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>43</sup> Jennifer Wagner, “Interpreting the Implications of DNA Ancestry Tests,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 53, no. 2 (2010): 241.

AIMS matches, mostly in Europe. The first company neglected to tell Gates about his multiple, inconclusive matches. He stated that the first company “told me what they thought I wanted to hear,” believing Gates’s ties to the African diaspora would be most compelling to him.<sup>44</sup> After this incident Gates became a critic of the industry, but within a few years, again used it on his program. Perhaps for someone in Gates’s position of relative privilege, such a revelation might not be earth-shattering, but for adoptees searching for information about birth families and likelihoods of inheriting ethnically-specific diseases, the consequences could be direr.

Material consequences also take economic forms. For example, the Black Seminoles of Florida do not know whether to “authenticate” their relationship to the Seminole Indian Tribes. If they do, and tests are positive, they may be entitled to more federal benefits than they current have; if they do and tests are negative, they risk losing all the benefits they currently possess.<sup>45</sup> Jennifer Wagner suggests that one benefit of these DNA tests is that they help us, “visualize just how antiquated our civil rights framework is today.”<sup>46</sup> As she explains,

America is a diverse metapopulation that historically pigeonholed clinical biological diversity within categorical social and legal constructs...questioning how to categorize children of recent admixture...and questioning how to define individuals with complex proportional ancestry in contradiction to our biased perceptions of what such an individual “should” look like, might help us blur, both socially and genetically, these arbitrary categories.<sup>47</sup>

Visual appearance is not inherently tied to particular racial, ethnic, or national groups, and the physical traits we associate with particular groups change over time, as Sander Gilman has

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<sup>44</sup> Ron Nixon, “DNA Tests Find Branches but Few Roots,” *New York Times*, November 25, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/25/business/25dna.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Duster, “Ancestry Testing and DNA,” 5.

<sup>46</sup> Wagner, “Interpreting the Implications,” 240.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

shown in his work on racialized plastic surgery.<sup>48</sup> For instance, there is a surgery in England to fix “Football Association cup ears,” or ears that stick out, associated with Irish people. The equivalent surgery does not exist in the US where Irish assimilation happened much more smoothly into dominant white culture. In other words, the unreliability of these tests reaffirms the arbitrary nature of our ethnoracial categories, which Wagner sees as potentially productive in undermining biological notions of race.

#### 4.1.2 Lay interpretation of genetics

With extensive media coverage of scientific advancements in genetics and the hope of potential life-changing discoveries, genetic theories have spilled over into popular culture. However, Dorothy Nelkin and M. Susan Lindee argue, the complexity of genetic science: “disappears when the gene serves its public roles as a resource for scientists seeking public support and as a popular explanation for social problems and human behavior, and a justification for policy agenda.”<sup>49</sup> I will add to their list that the complexity also disappears when genetic terms are used as sensationalist bait in news story headlines. As Brian Wynne explains, there is a systematic deletion of uncertainty when genomic science is translated to the public.<sup>50</sup> Rather than admit that there are issues which are unknown, scientists put forth reductive information. Additionally, through the creation of recent social media formats such as listicles (articles in a list format), uncertainty is presented and spread as confirmed “facts.”

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<sup>48</sup> Sander Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 97.

<sup>49</sup> Nelkin and Lindee, *The DNA Mystique*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Brian Wynne, “Reflexing Complexity: Post-Genomic Knowledge and Reductionist Returns in Public Science,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 22 no. 5 (2005): 70.

The general public has an overall limited understanding of genetic science.<sup>51</sup> When genetic science enters the popular discourse, people begin to use information in simplified ways, creating what Toby Epstein Jayaratne et al. refer to as “genetic lay theories.”<sup>52</sup> Belief in genetic lay theories leads to essentialist thinking, especially by white people, and it can create the impression that social categories are discrete, immutable, and determined by natural forces. Subsequently, genetic lay theories may serve as ideologies that legitimize racist and other discriminatory modes of thinking, because of the often-unquestioned social power of science. Research has shown that when people understand race as genetic, they think of themselves as biologically—and thus socially—distinct from other racial groups.<sup>53</sup> Of particular concern, as previously mentioned, is the fact that genetic information has stronger public authority than other kinds of data, such as social or environmental.<sup>54</sup> Part of this is because genetic science is particularly highly publicized and given a wide range of media platforms.<sup>55</sup> In the next section, I will describe a publicized event that used the genetic science of red hair as a marketing strategy.

## 4.2 THE REDHEAD EVENT

In May of 2016, I traveled to the “Redhead Event,” in Portland, Oregon. The event was part of the Oregon Health and Science University’s Department of Dermatology’s “War on Skin Cancer.” The primary objectives of the day were to increase public awareness about melanoma,

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<sup>51</sup> Dar-Nimrod and Heine, “Genetic Essentialism,” 803.

<sup>52</sup> Toby Epstein Jayaratne et al., “White Americans’ Genetic Lay Theories of Race Differences and Sexual Orientation: Their Relationship with Prejudice toward Blacks, and Gay Men and Lesbians,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 9, no. 1 (2006): 79.

<sup>53</sup> Dar-Nimrod and Heine, “Genetic Essentialism,” 805.

<sup>54</sup> Foster and Sharp, “Race, Ethnicity, and Genomics,” 848.

<sup>55</sup> Nelkin and Lindee, *The DNA Mystique*, 3.

to expand the community melanoma registry, and collect DNA samples for research. To advance these War-on-Skin-Cancer objectives, organizers devised the Redhead Event as somewhat of a publicity stunt involving melanoma-susceptible people with red hair. They hoped to break the Guinness Book of World Record's record for most naturally redheaded people in one place at the same time, in a way that would draw attention to their larger objectives. The event was both a recruiting and a marketing tool. As such, redheaded people were bioethnically conscripted with melanoma prior to even entering the event space.

#### **4.2.1 Positive reactions to the scientific framing of the event**

Some attendees of the Redhead Event were excited to find out more about how they could protect themselves against the increased risk of melanoma. For Heather, the convention was extremely personal:

I gave my blood and my spit [to the researchers at the event collecting DNA samples]. I've had melanoma and basal cell. They mention that with the spit, they can tell if it's genetic or not. So that would be great to know if it's genetic. And they'll actually call and let you know. Really interesting. There's environmental reasons, I mean I used to be in the sun a lot. I used to sun-tan in tanning beds. I'm sure that didn't help [but] I went on the registry because I've had melanoma and basal cell. That's a huge interest for me.<sup>56</sup>

Heather's interest in knowing if her cancer had a genetic component expanded beyond her own illnesses, because she has a son who could also potentially be at risk. Heather noted that environmental factors, like lying in tanning beds, probably "didn't help" in her development of two types of skin cancer, but she was still deeply interested in understanding the genetics of her condition.

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<sup>56</sup> Heather Sterba, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.



Angela, who also had a family history of cancer, stated that:

I have read so many different studies and you know, I mean, just it really depends on what study you're [looking at]...because one will conflict the other. I gave some DNA and I'm really interested to find out what part that's playing in the cancer. When I first heard about it, I'm like it's because "uh we're pale skin, duh" but I guess they're looking into more than just that, so I mean it would be interesting to find out.<sup>57</sup>

The notion that pale skin would be more susceptible to skin cancer seemed like common sense to Angela and many other attendees, but she and they were still keen to hear that there was a genetic explanation for it. Angela's observation that studies conflict with one another reflects the popular press reporting of scientific studies, which I will examine further later in this chapter.

Shawn also donated his DNA and was attentive to the genetics of melanoma.

Additionally, he was curious about the recessive nature of the MC1R gene and the fact that it was only expressed as red hair in some of his family members:

I [was] curious how and why, 'cause only two out of eight kids only [in my family] have red hair, so I want to know why. Recessive gene – interesting! Then, recently, I don't know how long ago, but I learned that redheads are more susceptible to melanoma, skin cancer. I thought that was pretty interesting. I'm curious why. I'm sure a lot of people are.<sup>58</sup>

For these narrators, attending the event was influenced by both their desire to participate in a fun day targeted to redheaded people, but also to learn more about the heightened risks of their phenotype, particularly, their propensity to melanoma. Generally, these people found the links between red hair and melanoma interesting, in addition to foreboding.

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<sup>57</sup> Angela Zecha, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Shawn Cannon, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

#### 4.2.2 Negative reactions to the scientific framing of the event

Though many people were intrigued by the work exhibited at the convention and its link to red hair, several narrators were offended by the scientific community's presumption that something was inherently wrong with them. Kari explained that:

We have three children, none of them have red hair, and more than once their health teachers have told them that freckles are skin damage and that somebody who has freckles is damaged—to whole groups of children! And my sons, they'll worry. It is not true, it's uneven pigment. You can get freckles without having any sun damage at all, but I can't believe health professionals are teaching a generation of people that this is damage. 'Cause then I go to pick up my sons and they're [her sons' classmates] gonna look at me and go "oh his mom's got damage all over her." It's really frustrating that health professionals teach that.<sup>59</sup>

Kari felt that the imprecise language used by her sons' health teachers further pathologized redheaded people. Scientifically, freckles occur in: "genetically predisposed individuals who have been exposed to the ultraviolet radiation of sunlight," causing "production of the pigment melanin [to increase] in the pigment cells of the skin."<sup>60</sup> Whether or not freckles are actually a condition of medical concern is a contested issue.<sup>61</sup> However, they have been used as evidence of the "biological" disgust (as discussed in Chapter Three) that redheads supposedly invoke in other people. For example, in an article entitled, "Why Redheads are Genetically Less Attractive," author Greg Stevens writes, "there is a reasonable theory to explain why the bias

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<sup>59</sup> Kari Yon, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>60</sup> "Freckle," *Britannica Academic*, 2016,

<http://academic.eb.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/levels/collegiate/article/freckle/35223>.

<sup>61</sup> The *British Medical Journal* published the results of a survey done with their readers on the "Top Ten Non-Diseases." They defined a "non-disease" as: a human process or problem that some have defined as a medical condition but where people may have better outcomes if the problem or process was not defined in that way." Freckles ranked number 7 on the list of 20 non-diseases. Richard Smith, "In Search of 'Non-Diseases,'" *British Medical Journal* 324, no. 7342 (2002): 883-5.

against freckles might be more than just a cultural prejudice. Not to be too blunt about it, but freckles are cancer factories.”<sup>62</sup> Despite its lack of scientific basis, this quote represents the social prejudice Kari fears that she will face.

Lindsay, who herself works at an oncology hospital, said that:

In particular, I work in the melanoma group. The thing that’s interesting there is when we’re in tumor board and discussing cases, someone will crop up and they [the oncologists] will say, “oh well, I mean, her chances of melanoma [were high]...I mean, she had red hair, pale skin, blue eyes.” And you just start sitting there going, “that’s me. Am I the posterchild for potential melanoma?”<sup>63</sup>

Though as a researcher Lindsay is interested in the science of melanoma (she later talked about her excitement when learning of new potential treatments through scientific studies), she was uncomfortable with the attention focused on her as one of, or the only, red-haired person in the room when red hair, light skin and light eye colors were discussed as melanoma risk factors. Lindsay’s experience describes the perceived “two-way pathognomicity” within red haired science, “in that the presence of the hypothesized genes is seen to prove the presence of the condition.”<sup>64</sup> Since it is known that mutations on the MC1R gene are involved in melanoma, those who show the phenotype of these mutations are assumed to have the condition. In the case of Lindsay’s meeting, the patient’s melanoma was viewed as inevitable. Such conversation draws attention to a negative aspect of redheadedness, one that is particularly upsetting for people like Lindsay, because it is both so embodied and visible to others.

Andy summarized Kari and Lindsay’s feelings with his comment that a person might describe themselves by saying, “I have blonde hair, I have brunette hair, [versus] I have a

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<sup>62</sup> Greg Stevens, “Why Redheads are Genetically Less Attractive,” *The Kernel*, <http://kernelmag.dailydot.com/features/report/8233/why-redheads-are-genetically-less-attractive>.

<sup>63</sup> Lindsay Chandler, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Dar-Nimrod and Heine, “Genetic Essentialism,” 802.

medical condition. [It's a] very different vibe, very different tone.” The medicalization of red hair, which undergirded the entire event, as well as other “ginger pride” festivals, such the 2015 Irish Redhead Convention, a fundraiser for the Irish Cancer Society, both calls attention to increased risk of skin cancer and further labels redheads as biologically (and subsequently socially) different. Andy’s comment reflects Katie Featherstone and Paul Atkinson’s claim that medical conditions are “socially produced.”<sup>65</sup> This is not to say that redheaded people do not have increased risks of some diseases, but that the framing of redheadedness itself as a disease has depended upon “socially organized” work, done by people working in institutions of power like medicine or mass media, as well as in interpersonal interactions, such as in conversation or sharing social media content.<sup>66</sup> As Peter Conrad explains, it does not matter so much whether a condition (like freckles, for example) is “really” medical or not; what is important, rather, is that medicalization has social consequences. One of the consequences that is especially important here is that medicalization of the body pathologizes difference. When difference becomes pathologized, tolerance and appreciation for diversity diminish.<sup>67</sup>

#### **4.2.3 Recognition of biological difference**

As much as Andy was bothered by the medicalization of red hair, he was also frustrated by others’ lack of understanding that there are some embodied aspects of having red hair and light skin that do require special consideration. Other people’s insinuations that these differences do not

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<sup>65</sup> Featherstone and Atkinson, *Creating Conditions*, 42.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Peter Conrad, *The Medicalization of Society* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 148-9.

matter were harmful for Andy and some other narrators. For example, Dan recalled that when he was a young child:

My mom put baby oil on me and put me outside, thinking I could get a tan once. Okay? I couldn't get a tan. I was young. I think I picked up on it pretty quickly... We're more likely to become alcoholics because we can tolerate more alcohol, but at the same time, we also are less receptive to Novocain and different kind of pain medications because we actually have to take more to activate it because of some kind of gene mutation, in a nutshell. So, when I go to the dentist, they know, because I have red hair, to give me more anesthesia. And as an anesthesiologist, they are trained to treat [us differently]. I'm not even kidding. It's so weird. And it's happened when I've gone under the mask, where they put the mask on you, when you go under, they've been like, 'oh yeah, we need to give you a little bit more because you're a fuckin' redhead.' I've had that happen to me!<sup>68</sup>

Dan, like most narrators, had come across popular news versions of the studies upon which these claims were based. Notably, Dan was the only narrator who mentioned redheads' propensity to alcoholism (outside of stereotypes about Irishness and alcohol consumption), and I could not find any research to support this claim. The rest of Dan's examples were brought up by many narrators, but Dan's comments were especially insightful because he recalled not only the research, but the real-life effects he endured due to this research either being or not being widely known by others in his life. Therefore, while overall the insistence on redheaded people's genetic differences from the general population is experienced negatively for many people, there are also reasons to highlight this research. In this section I have introduced some redheaded people's experiences with their pathologized hair color. In what follows, I will explore more deeply the concept of the "ginger gene."

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<sup>68</sup> Dan Wallace, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Winthrop, MA, July 9, 2016. Dan did not attend the Redhead Event, but spoke to matters of science at length in his interview.

### 4.3 THE “GINGER GENE”

Long before scientists discovered that variations on the MC1R gene were responsible for the expression of red hair, the trait was already suspected to be genetic. Theories about red hair’s biological origins and relationship to diseases were reported in mainstream newspapers, representing an early pathologization of red hair. As early as 1941, researchers recognized that there was a genetic component to red hair because it ran in families.<sup>69</sup> A 1972 article from the *Panama City News-Herald* suggested a correlation between red hair, tuberculosis, and rheumatic fever,<sup>70</sup> and a 1979 piece from the *New York Times* reported a suspected ethnoracial link between red hair, “especially amongst the Irish,” and skin cancer.<sup>71</sup> In a precursor to the listicles I will discuss later in this chapter, Dolly Katz described curious patterns between red hair and a whole host of diseases, most of which are not recognized today, in a 1981 article in the *Akron Beacon Journal*.<sup>72</sup> By 1995, as part of the Human Genome Project, reporters publicized the intentional “search for a redheaded gene.”<sup>73</sup> With the discovery of the MC1R gene and much of the project completed by the early 2000s, red hair once again made news in a biological context. The *Australian* suggested, playing to sexualized stereotypes, that “Better Red in the Bed if it's Down to Natural Selection,”<sup>74</sup> in an attempt to explain the high number of redheads in Edinburgh,

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<sup>69</sup> Waldemar Kaempffert, “Science in The News,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1941, D5.

<sup>70</sup> “Redheads Get Disease?” *Panama City News-Herald*, August 6, 1972, 39.

<sup>71</sup> Dr. Zsolt Harsanyi and Richard Hutton, “Those Genes That Tell The Future,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1979, SM49.

<sup>72</sup> Dolly Katz, “The Puzzle of Red Hair, Its Link to Disease,” *Akron Beacon Journal*, July 31, 1981, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Tim Hilchey, “The Search for a Redheaded Gene Stumbles Over One for Sunburn,” *New York Times*, November 1, 1995, C13.

<sup>74</sup> Alex O’Connell, “Better Red in the Bed if it's Down to Natural Selection,” *The Australian*, October 12, 2000, 10.

Scotland. The *Courier Mail* (Brisbane, AU) was among the first news sources to report that not only redheads, but also people who “carry the gene for red hair” have an increased risk of skin cancer.<sup>75</sup> The timing of the Human Genome Project coincided with the rise in internet news, with sixty North American newspapers online by 1995, and more than 5,000 worldwide newspapers online by the project’s completion in 2003.<sup>76</sup> As such, after this time, stories about red hair and science, while still sometimes published in print, were also published online.

After the completion of the Human Genome Project and the realization that the MC1R gene was significant for many types of conditions, red hair became increasingly medicalized. Soon after these discoveries Kick a Ginger Day took place. With redheaded people having been recently coded as biologically Other, the events were especially concerning. Thus, online news reporting about red hair picked up again in the mid-to-late 2000s. The presentation of red hair as a genetic disorder through online news articles, listicles, and videos offers an example of a hyper-created or hyper-produced disease, which in this case reflects broader cultural concerns about white masculinity and its perception as demasculinated and weak.

DNA testing of redheaded people is a complicated case. The MC1R gene, which is responsible for the expression of various shades of red hair and pale skin tones was identified in the mid-1990s and work on it increased following the Human Genome Project. In 2003, Jonathan Rees summarized work on the MC1R gene, defining it as responsible for “normal variation in pigmentation.”<sup>77</sup> With the advent of direct-to-consumer DNA testing, however, mutations on this

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<sup>75</sup> “Red Signals Cancer Risk,” *The Courier Mail*, October 30, 2000, 5.

<sup>76</sup> David Shedden, “New Media Timeline (1995),” *Poynter*, December 16, 2004, <https://www.poynter.org/news/new-media-timeline-1995>; David Shedden, “New Media Timeline (2003),” *Poynter*, December 16, 2004, <https://www.poynter.org/news/new-media-timeline-2003>.

<sup>77</sup> Jonathan L. Rees, “Genetics of Hair and Skin Color,” *Annual Review of Genetics* 37, no. 1 (2003): 67–90.

gene were subsequently presented to the public as decidedly abnormal. For redheads, DNA tests are used not only to determine a person's racial or ethnic lineage, but to determine whether or not they are in fact a "real" redhead, and to identify potential medical risks that accompany this trait. In this project, I am particularly interested in both the framing of red hair as a genetic mutation and in allegations of genetic discrimination towards ginger people, based on their DNA. In what follows, I will look more closely at the construction of the "ginger gene," through marketing for, press coverage of, and audience response to BritainsDNA's direct-to-consumer MC1R DNA test.

#### 4.3.1 The MC1R Gene

MC1R or the melanocortin-1 receptor, is a gene found on chromosome 16.<sup>78</sup> Contrary to how many people perceive it, MC1R is found in all human beings, not just in redheads. Articles labeling it the "ginger gene," for instance, have created a misnomer. Similarly, articles that suggest that the "MC1R Gene is Really a Genetic Mutation" again miss the point that the gene itself is not a genetic mutation. Likewise, some of my narrators claimed that they "have MC1R," which is technically true, but it does not distinguish them in any way from the rest of the population. Variants are common on the MC1R gene: more than 100 variants have been found.<sup>79</sup> It is a specific set of variants, however, called loss-of-function mutations, that are responsible for the expression of red hair.<sup>80</sup> As of 2015, nine distinct variants were linked with the phenotype

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<sup>78</sup> "MC1R Gene: Genetics Home Reference," *US National Library of Medicine*, 2018, <https://ghr.nlm.nih.gov/gene/MC1R#synonyms>.

<sup>79</sup> J. Puig-Butillé, et al., "Distribution of MC1R Variants Among Melanoma Subtypes: p.R163Q is Associated with Lentigo Maligna Melanoma in a Mediterranean Population," *British Journal of Dermatology* 169, no. 4 (2013): 2.

<sup>80</sup> "MC1R Melanocortin 1 Receptor [Homo Sapiens (Human)]," *National Center for Biotechnology Information*, 2018, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/gene?Db=gene&Cmd=DetailsSearch&Term=4157>.



combination of red hair, light skin, and freckles.<sup>81</sup> In this scientific context, the terms variant and mutation are used interchangeably.<sup>82</sup> However, within popular press and social media, the term “mutation,” is often used, presumably for its shock value.

#### 4.3.2 The MC1R DNA test: marketing

From late 2012 through 2013, BritainsDNA,<sup>83</sup> a direct-to-consumer ancestry DNA testing company, advertised the release of its new test, the Chromo2 Redhead test, and its correlating “red head project,” an attempt to map the world’s redheads. The press release announcing the project’s completion took advantage of the ongoing ginger phenomenon and pride movement:

To coincide with the Redhead Convention to be held in Crosshaven, County Cork, Ireland, from Friday August 23rd to Sunday August 25th (check out the website for red-gastration and the likes of carrot-throwing competitions) and in the wake of the Ginger Pride march held during the Edinburgh Festival, we announce the result of a year long project to discover how red-headed Britain and Ireland are, and we publish the first ever map of the red-headed nations and regions.<sup>84</sup>

In online advertising, the company used mock family trees overlaid with DNA strands, and illustrated DNA ladders with colorfully patterned backgrounds.<sup>85</sup> As Troy Duster argues,

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<sup>81</sup> E. Tagliabue, et al. “MC1R Gene Variants and Non-Melanoma Skin Cancer: A Pooled-Analysis from the M-SKIP Project,” *British Cancer Journal* 113, no. 2 (2015): 355.

<sup>82</sup> Roshan Karki, Deep Pandya, Robert C Elston, Cristiano Ferlini, “Defining ‘Mutation’ and ‘Polymorphism’ in the Era of Personal Genomics,” *BMC Medical Genomics* 8, no. 37 (2015): 4.

<sup>83</sup> Throughout its time as a corporation, BritainsDNA was also known and advertised as, ScotlandsDNA, IrelandsDNA, YorkshiresDNA, CymryuDNA Wales and finally MyDNAGlobal. I will use the name BritainsDNA to talk about this company because this was the first name under which the Chromo 2 Redhead Test was marketed.

<sup>84</sup> “BritainsDNA Announces the Results of the Red-Head Project,” *BritainsDNA*, 2013, [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/mace-lab/genetic-ancestry/guff\\_pages/guff\\_documents/Red-Head\\_Project.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/mace-lab/genetic-ancestry/guff_pages/guff_documents/Red-Head_Project.pdf).

<sup>85</sup> “Chromo2 Red Hair,” *My DNA Global*, 2016, <https://www.mydna.global/products/chromo2-red-head-dna-trait-test>.

such images “provide an appearance of precision,”<sup>86</sup> and imply authority, even though they represent no actual data. The test was also marketed at in-person genealogical fairs, especially at the 2013 “Who Do You Think You Are?” event in London. The event was associated with the family-history television show of the same name. The majority of the Chromo2 Redhead test’s online press coverage was in relation to BritainsDNA’s scheduled appearance at this event.

Notably, faculty from the Molecular and Cultural Evolution Lab at the University College London have documented and spoken out about Allastair Moffat (the CEO of BritainsDNA) and his scientific and business practices since 2012. They refer to his work as “genetic astrology” and claim that Moffat is responsible for publically spreading wild misinformation, including the myth of redheaded people’s threatened extinction.<sup>87</sup> In this dissertation, I do not rely on Moffat’s work as evidence of genetic science, but rather as examples of the discourses that surround it.

### **4.3.3 The MC1R DNA test: press**

There is a seemingly obvious problem with marketing a test to determine whether or not someone has an observable physical characteristic, especially one that is made extra-visible by virtue of its rarity. BritainsDNA conceded this in their press release: “No-one needs a DNA test to tell if they have red hair. All they need is a mirror.”<sup>88</sup> What value then, could the test offer? In order to bypass this flaw, BritainsDNA reframed the test’s purpose: “What BritainsDNA set out

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<sup>86</sup> Duster, “Ancestry Testing and DNA”, 8.

<sup>87</sup> “BritainsDNA Saga,” *Molecular and Cultural Evolution Lab – University College London*, 2017, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/mace-lab/genetic-ancestry>.

<sup>88</sup> “BritainsDNA Announces the Results of the Red-Head Project,” *BritainsDNA*.

to discover was a hidden story, one never before told. This is the story of the secret carriers.”<sup>89</sup> Subsequently, the idea of “secret” and “hidden” carriers and risks dominated online press about the Chromo2 test. To analyze press coverage, I completed a discourse analysis of six British news and tabloid articles, as well as 583 reader comments. Articles were from the *Huffington Post UK*, the *Daily Mail*, *The Telegraph*, the *Mirror* and the *Stylist*. These articles range from 203 to 1,639 words and appeared in the health, science, “weird news,” and beauty sections of these papers. These articles are all from British sources, because, as previously mentioned, most press about the test was in the context of the genealogical exhibition in London. I chose these particular articles because of their circulation on major social media platforms and their readers’ engagement with their content in the comments sections. Three major themes emerged from my analysis of the articles’ content: red hair is presented as an undesirable condition, a “silent” genetic threat, and a risk to one’s medical and social health.

#### 4.3.3.1 An undesirable condition

Overall, the articles present having red hair as an undesirable condition. They do this with their framing of the MC1R DNA test. The majority of the articles represent the test as something potential parents would undergo before deciding to have children. For example, *Huffington Post UK* states that “Parents-to-be have the chance to find out whether they could have children with red hair.” Similarly, the *Mirror* says that, “Couples who want to know if they could have ginger babies are being offered red hair-detecting DNA tests.” Such tag-lines make it seem as though the test is offered as genetic counseling, rather than a novelty direct-to-consumer product.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

#### 4.3.3.2 A “silent threat”

The articles also frame red hair as a genetic disease. Multiple articles invoke the term “silent genes” to explain that even though one may not physically present with red hair, if she or he is a carrier of the mutation, he or she is still at risk of the supposed “side effects” that accompany being redheaded. For example, the *Daily Mail* goes so far as to say that, “there may be no outward signs that you are harbouring this mutation and there may not even be any redheads in your close family. But the mutated redhead genes may be doing other things instead.” These “other things” that the mutation may be doing are varied – and typically drawn from un-cited scientific studies, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

#### 4.3.3.3 Medical and social risks

Finally, the articles present the “risks” of having red hair. The *Daily Mail* (2012) argues that redheads are more prone to certain health risks, including “sensitivity to pain, skin cancer, Parkinson’s disease and even Tourette’s syndrome.” Even the *Stylist* notes that recent studies “link the colouring to heightened feelings of pain.” A follow up article from the *Daily Mail* expands upon the risks identified in the first, adding that “one of the latest links being examined is whether these mutated red-haired genes are linked to an increased risk of babies being born overweight.” They also add that fear of excessive pain and requiring “on average 20 per cent more general anesthesia than those with dark or blonde hair” make redheads avoid going to the dentist, which can in turn lead to increase oral hygiene problems. In addition to health risks,

articles present the “social risks” associated with red hair. *Huffington Post UK*, for example, states, “recent research suggests red hair is associated with significantly less attractiveness and a lack of congeniality.” I will return to the theme of uncited genetic risks in more depth in the section on listicles.

#### **4.3.4 The MC1R DNA test: audience responses**

The articles hosted a total of 583 reader comments. Although the articles analyzed here are British publications, readers identify themselves as commenting from the UK, the US, Australia, and other parts of the world, again emphasizing that this phenomenon is not localized to one geographical area, and even aspects of it that are geographically-specific (such as this genealogical exhibit) get blurred when the information spreads online. Audience responses vary, but overall show empathy for redheaded people and questioned the test’s purported value. The comments can be broken down into the following themes: anger over the pathologization of red hair, concern for bullying of redheads, and fear about this test as a precursor to human eugenics.

##### **4.3.4.1 Anger over pathologization**

Readers of these articles were often upset by the presentation of red hair as a genetic disorder. As one red-headed reader put it “they’re making us out to be freaks.” Another asks, “A carrier of the gene...? This makes it sound like some sort of hideous disease.” One commenter sums up this sentiment, saying “I’m glad I’m not the only one disturbed by the implication that red hair is like a disease one should be tested for before making the decision to have children!” The discourses

used in these news articles represent the physical expression of red hair both as a literal genetic mutation, and as readers interpret it, as a cultural marker for potential discrimination.

#### 4.3.4.2 Concern for bullying

Readers, likely already aware of or perhaps even part of these cultural conversations about redhead prejudice, draw links between the MC1R test and gingerism as is experienced in daily life or highlighted in mass media. Many people use the comments section as a public space in which they demand recognition of the legitimacy of this problem and call for protections for redheads, especially children who are the victims of increasingly severe bullying in schools. Commenters recognize the release of this test as perpetuating the stereotyping and bullying of gingers. Multiple institutions, especially the scientific industries, are accused of contributing to this problem. For example, one commenter says, “Its [sic] people like these scientists that cause the bullying at school of the ginger population.” Another adds, “I am very disappointed that a fellow scientist would be prepared to put his name to data based on correlation which encourages negative responses to a whole group of people based on... hair colour.” Several commenters also misinterpret the funding for this testing, believing it to be part of a federally funded research program, or associated with the NHS, rather than a product sold directly to consumers by a private company. Comments such as, “what a shame. All that science lab money gone to this cause instead of, I don’t know, curing cancer, maybe?” and “surely these scientists have something better to do, like curing illnesses and diseases. I like to know who is paying their wages, and ask him or her what they do all day?” show that the company (BritainsDNA) and the profit incentive behind this test are not clear to the readers. Other readers place the blame on

media outlets, such as the online publications analyzed here that cover stories of this nature. They refer to “pathetic media stories about ‘Gingers’ that put forward the view that its [sic] ok to rip the hell out of them and they are different than everyone else but never in a good way.” Commenters also note that overall redheaded boys are much more likely to be bullied than redheaded girls. The suggestion that redheads are subjected to a variety of health risks makes them seem weak, playing into stereotypes about redheaded masculinity.

#### 4.3.4.3 Fear of eugenics

One overarching question readers of these news articles have is, if one takes this test, how will the knowledge of the results be used? Because many articles frame the purpose as a test for potential parents who are interested in seeing whether or not they might carry a redheaded child, readers are concerned about the test being used for selective genetic engineering. One reader, in response to the *Huffington Post UK* article claims, “This is pure evil, what next will they think off [sic]. Wont [sic] this cause children to be aborted?” The suggestion that this test will lead people to abort fetuses if both parents are carriers of the mutation is one of the most popular concerns across the articles’ responses. Although the test is designed for individual adults and not fetuses, this distinction becomes blurred in both the discourse of the news articles themselves, and in people’s responses to them. Another reader comments, “I think this whole anti ginger is a form of racism. What are they going to say ok then you can have an abortion!!!” The use of the word “racism” in the previous comment is in line with other concerns that such DNA testing is in fact a government funded project to preserve (white Anglo) “Englishness,” with gingeriness standing in here for a type of Celtic Other. Many people throughout the

comments sections describe English culture as insular and prejudicial, again referencing histories of immigration and colonization, not only of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh people, but also of growing immigration by more recent, non-white groups. Some claim that this is part of a government plan against immigration. Others express fear the NHS will actually provide funding for abortions for fetuses that test “positive” for the mutation. Appeals are also made to history of eugenics: “The last time a white person tried to do this it ended up causing WW2 What’s wrong with this picture?????” Another reader comments, “This is also a classic example to me why people SHOULD read history and history books, and why we SHOULD study Hitler and all that....”

While most of the comments above are seemingly concerned about this test from a social justice standpoint, there is another group of commenters who are equally concerned for different reasons. In comments on all six of the articles, people express fears that this test promotes “reverse racism.” One person in response to the *Daily Mail* says, “‘Ginger’, the only form of racism that’s still accepted and even encouraged. But ‘gingers’ are white, so that’s okay then.” Another reader says that, “this article highlights one of the worst discrimination issues of the current age...except the people discriminated against are white-skinned, so apparently this does not qualify as true discrimination. Just shameful....This is all part of a politically-correct agenda which is, in fact, outright discrimination.” Others echo similar sentiments, expressing their belief in a post-racial world, wherein racism is based solely on skin color, with no historical or structural components, and is therefore interchangeable with hair color prejudice. For example, one person says, “calling someone with red hair ginger is as racist and nasty as calling someone with dark skin a name.” Kristen Myers employs the term, “white fright” to describe the fear that



white people are “at risk” of becoming a minority and/or losing privilege.<sup>90</sup> These types of fears often lead to accusations of reverse racism and assertions that we are post-racial, as seen in these comments. The bullying associated with gingerism can at times be severe and the MC1R test certainly offers cause for further concern. However, it is important to be aware that these discourses are simultaneously used to support the problematic ideas that we live in a post-racial world and that reverse racism exists. These themes will be further theorized in Chapter Five.

#### 4.3.5 Construction of genetic disease

At-home DNA testing has not only encouraged people to seek out their ancestral origins, but also promises consumers helpful information about genetic health. However, in the case of people with red hair, sensationalist reporting and the growth of the ginger meme have led to the pathologization of red hair itself as a genetic disorder. As Katie Featherstone and Paul Atkinson explain in their work on genetic mutations and disorders,

Medical conditions are created and not merely discovered. More than most phenomena in the domains of natural and medical science, clinical entities—diseases and syndromes—are produced through multiple acts of description, recognition, definition and classification.<sup>91</sup>

Every disease can be traced historically, but the narratives surrounding them are rarely neat.<sup>92</sup>

Rather, changes in social structures, systems of classification, and medical technology all contribute to the production or creation of particular diseases. The Chromo 2 Redhead test

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<sup>90</sup> Kristen Meyers, “White Fright: Reproducing White Supremacy Through Casual Discourse,” in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Race*, ed. Ashley “Woody” Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (New York: Routledge, 2003), 129.

<sup>91</sup> Katie Featherstone and Paul Atkinson, *Creating Conditions: The Making and Remaking of a Genetic Syndrome* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 25.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

played into the existing ginger meme, which led to widespread, sensationalist media coverage and publicity. Such publicity, combined with the increasingly popular and profitable direct-to-consumer DNA testing industry, resulted in a new level of pathologization of red hair.

#### 4.4 SOCIAL MEDIA CIRCULATION OF REDHEADED FACTS

Along with popular news articles, listicles are one of the most common ways that redheaded science circulates and is consumed by internet users. Listicles, articles in list form, are a new media format that has increased in popularity in the last few years. Many listicles have also been translated into video format, in which text appears onscreen, acted out by a redheaded model, or animated. In this section I will first review the literature on listicles as a form of new media content, then analyze seven such pieces, and finally share comments from my narrators about how they access redhead science via such new media.

##### 4.4.1 Listicles as a new media format

Jessica Birthisel writes that online content creators,

assume that readers want information in quick hits, lists, slideshows, memes and sound bites instead of long articles. Their sensational headlines drive traffic to a site, generating more money from advertising, and they build on the belief that today's readers prefer mindless fluff and trivia over hard news and heavy stories.<sup>93</sup>

Readers can easily find such content in the listicle format. As scholars have noted, the word “listicle” is a portmanteau of “list” and “article.”<sup>94</sup> Dana A. Knott and Angel M. Gondek add that

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<sup>93</sup> Jessica Birthisel, “‘Too Embarrassed to Ask’: The Pros and Cons of Foreign Affairs Explainers in The Washington Post,” *Bridgewater Review* 33, no. 1 (2014): 15.

<sup>94</sup> Bram Vijgen, “The Listicle: An Exploring Research on an Interesting Shareable New Media Phenomenon,” *Studia Ubb Ephemerides* 59, no. 1 (2014): 104; Amber White, “Using Digital

the format typically includes, “a numbered list with a catchy title, centered around a theme, and [is] made more magnetic through the inclusion of images or GIFs.”<sup>95</sup> The OED first included “listicle” in its third edition in September 2016, citing its earliest use in 2007;<sup>96</sup> however, on his self-published blog of “Americanisms,” OED contributor Barry Popik cites its earliest use as 2001 and claims it was popularized by a 2003 article from *Gawker*.<sup>97</sup>

Despite the relatively recent introduction of the specific term “listicle,” Dennis Hall argues that “listomania” has been circulating in the public sphere for a long time. For example, he cites the Ten Commandments and soldiers’ names on the Vietnam War memorial as historically important lists.<sup>98</sup> Hall theorizes lists as popular culture icons and identifies several qualities they share that are important for this project.<sup>99</sup> First, lists suggest authority to their readers; list makers either already have the authority to create these documents, or they assume authority by doing so. Furthermore, from the other side, appearing on a list oneself can either legitimize or condemn a person’s authority, character, or some other aspect of their identity.<sup>100</sup> Secondly, lists define categories and establish existence. As Hall explains, “When people, places,

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Think-Alouds to Build Comprehension of Online Informational Texts,” *Reading Teacher* 69, no. 4 (2016): 421.

<sup>95</sup> Dana A. Knott and Angel M. Gondek, “Find Us on Facebook: The Evolution of Social Media at a Community College Library,” in *Using Social Media to Build Library Communities*, ed. Scott W.H. Young and Doralyn Rossmann (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 53.

<sup>96</sup> “listicle, n.,” OED Online. September 2016. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/36354548?redirectedFrom=listicle#eid> (accessed December 28, 2017).

<sup>97</sup> Barry Popik, “Listicle (List + Article),” *The Big Apple*, July 22, 2013, [https://www.barrypopik.com/index.php/new\\_york\\_city/entry/listicle\\_list\\_article](https://www.barrypopik.com/index.php/new_york_city/entry/listicle_list_article); “What’s Over: Everything, Perpetually,” *Gawker*, November 11, 2003, <http://gawker.com/013871/whats-over-everything-perpetually>.

<sup>98</sup> Dennis Hall, “Listomania: The List as Popular Culture Icon,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 28, no. 1 (2005): 49.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

and things have been listed, they and the categories to which they belong are culturally constructed.”<sup>101</sup> In this case, for example, the understanding of gingers as a group of people who are genetically different from the rest of the population is largely the result of lists (in listicle format) that label them as “mutants.” Thirdly, both similarities and differences are oversimplified in lists. Within the boundaries of a list, likenesses are overemphasized and differences are overlooked; but, outside of a list’s boundaries, likenesses are overlooked and differences are overemphasized.<sup>102</sup> Within the examples to follow in this section, gingers are homogenized based on hair color, while differences such as gender, race, class, and health status are overlooked. Likewise, many of the genetic risk factors identified in these listicles could also apply to people with blonde hair and light skin, or people who are carriers of the MC1R mutation but do not physically express red hair. However, these differences are overemphasized and thus those other people are excluded from the category defined by the listicles. Each of the above described qualities that Hall identifies as pervading lists throughout time can be found in listicles about the ginger phenomenon.

In addition to having prominence in popular culture, generally, lists also have specific importance in mass media. For example, think of *New York Times* “Best Sellers Lists,” or David Lettermen’s “Top Ten Lists.” As early as 2005 Hall noted that, “the World Wide Web has fueled this human passion for lists with an unprecedented technical leverage and democratic spirit.”<sup>103</sup> Even though listicle was not yet a widely-used word, Hall correctly predicted that the internet would exacerbate “listomania.” Bram Vrijgen argues that the listicle has become the “lingua

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 50.

franca of the new media,”<sup>104</sup> much like how Ryan Milner describes memes.<sup>105</sup> Adding to Hall’s recognition of general technological innovations that make list creation easier and more accessible for greater numbers of people, Vijgen identifies four other aspects of listicles that make them especially successful in the new media environment. First, by using sensationalist headlines, listicles make people think that if they do not read them, they are missing out on key information. In a sense, they are “clickbait.”<sup>106</sup> Second, listicles have developed what Vijgen refers to as “easy recognition factor.” In an environment of limitless information, listicles have defined themselves as a particular kind of content, so they stand out amongst other less definable formats.<sup>107</sup> They appear to simply offer “facts.” Third, listicles are visually formatted in a way that aligns with how internet users read digital content, so they give the impression that they are a simple way to take in information.<sup>108</sup> Fourth, by virtue of being numbered, listicles contextualize time for readers, letting them know how far they have progressed, and how far they need to go.<sup>109</sup> Again, in a media environment in which there are unlimited options of things to click on and read, time becomes a limited resource, so this is important.

#### **4.4.2 Analysis of example listicles**

Listicles are a major part of the ginger phenomenon. In Chapter Two, for instance, I cited “20 Unbelievable Facts Every Ginger Person Should Know,” and in Chapter Three, a list of seven

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<sup>104</sup> Vijgen, “The Listicle,” 106.

<sup>105</sup> Milner, *The World Made Meme*, 7.

<sup>106</sup> Vijgen, “The Listicle,” 108.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

reasons to “hate” actress Kathy Griffin.<sup>110</sup> Other examples include titles like, “8 Historical Facts About Redheads and Witchcraft,” and “17 Very Real Problems Only Gingers Will Understand.”<sup>111</sup> There are innumerable listicles that are part of the larger ginger meme. Of particular interest for this chapter, however, are those listicles that explain the science of red hair and/or position the ginger as genetically different from the rest of the population. In this section, I will first look at three listicles that appeared in popular science online publications. Then, I will look at four listicles that appeared in mainstream news publications. These particular listicles were chosen as the sample because they were among the most often shared listicles about redheads via social media platforms (as measured by website counters), and because they focused at least 75% of their claims about redheads on science.<sup>112</sup> They come both from US and UK-based sites, with authors from these countries and from Australia.

The first group of listicles comes from online popular science publications. In this category, I analyzed three listicles: “8 Ways Having Red Hair Affects a Person’s Health, from Pain to Sex,” published on the health and science news website, *Medical Daily*;<sup>113</sup> “5 Health Risks of Being a Redhead,”<sup>114</sup> from *LiveScience*, another online popular science publication that

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<sup>110</sup> Kyle Kelly, “20 Unbelievable Facts Every Ginger Person Should Know,” *What Culture*, March 27, 2014, <http://whatculture.com/offbeat/20-unbelievable-facts-every-ginger-person-know>.

<sup>111</sup> Emma Ní Chearúil, “8 Historical Facts About Redheads and Witchcraft,” *How to Be a Redhead*, October 23, 2017, <https://howtobeadhead.com/8-historical-facts-about-redheads-and-witchcraft/>; Bethany Opler, “17 Very Real Problems Only Gingers Will Understand,” *BuzzFeed*, August 14, 2014, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/bethanyo465891d03/17-very-real-gingerproblems-wilh?utm\\_term=.hawxoylv#.hoyLj0GD](https://www.buzzfeed.com/bethanyo465891d03/17-very-real-gingerproblems-wilh?utm_term=.hawxoylv#.hoyLj0GD).

<sup>112</sup> In addition to scientific facts, sometimes such listicles also include statements about historical and mythological aspects of red hair.

<sup>113</sup> Samantha Olson, “8 Ways Having Red Hair Affects a Person’s Health, from Pain to Sex,” *Medical Daily*, August 8, 2015, <http://www.medicaldaily.com/8-ways-having-red-hair-affects-persons-health-pain-sex-348198>.

<sup>114</sup> Rachael Rettner, “5 Health Risks of Being a Redhead,” *Live Science*, August 22, 2013, <https://www.livescience.com/39095-redhead-health-risks.html>.

“offers a fascinating window into the natural and technological world;” and finally, “11 Scientific Facts that Make Redheads Special,” from *Curious Mind Magazine*, a digital publication focused on psychology, science, and health.<sup>115</sup> Each of these publications caters to an audience specifically interested in medical or scientific news. The second category is mainstream online news. Rather than catering to a specific audience of people interested in science, these sources are general interest publications. I will analyze two from UK publications and two from US publications (though one has an Australian author), again, chosen for their high circulation and inclusion of at least 75% claims focusing on science. The first is “Science Shows Redheads Have Genetic Superpowers,” published in the *NY Post*.<sup>116</sup> The second is “17 Surprising Facts You Probably Didn’t Know About Redheads,” from *Buzzfeed*.<sup>117</sup> The third is “Ten Reasons Why It’s Good to Be a Redhead,” from the *Independent*.<sup>118</sup> The fourth and final listicle is “The Surprising Health Benefits of Being Ginger,” from the *Telegraph*.<sup>119</sup> The purpose of analyzing listicles from both genres was to determine whether there were any differences between scientifically-aimed and general online news outlets. I analyzed three aspects of each listicle: the

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<sup>115</sup> Elizabeth, “11 Scientific Facts that Make Redheads Special,” *Curious Mind Magazine*, 2015, <https://curiousmindmagazine.com/11-scientific-facts-make-redheads-special>.

<sup>116</sup> Susannah Cahalan, “Science Shows Redheads Have Genetic Superpowers,” *NY Post*, December 2, 2017, <https://nypost.com/2017/12/02/science-shows-redheads-have-genetic-superpowers>.

<sup>117</sup> Mat Whitehead, “17 Surprising Facts You Probably Didn't Know About Redheads,” *Buzzfeed*, November 2, 2016, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/matwhitehead/redheads?utm\\_term=.oiDZ7K3Y#.gpMM5Zko](https://www.buzzfeed.com/matwhitehead/redheads?utm_term=.oiDZ7K3Y#.gpMM5Zko).

<sup>118</sup> Jacky Colliss, “Ten Reasons Why It’s Good to Be a Redhead,” *Independent*, September 15, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/features/ten-reasons-why-its-good-to-be-a-redhead-from-spartacus-and-scent-to-standing-up-for-difference-10502520.html>.

<sup>119</sup> Jonathan Wells, “The Surprising Health Benefits of Being Ginger,” *The Telegraph*, April 29, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health-fitness/body/the-surprising-health-benefits-of-being-ginger>.

claims made about people with red hair, the citations or lack of citations, and images that accompany the texts.

#### 4.4.2.1 Claims

Across these listicles, authors made thirty-one unique claims about people with red hair that are based on biology. These claims include that redheads are more likely to: be stung by bees and wasps, get bruises, be left-handed, develop Parkinson's disease, Tourette's syndrome, endometriosis, congenital melanocytic naevi, and skin cancer. In contrast, they are less likely to: "age badly," lose their hair color and go grey, or develop rickets, tuberculosis, or prostate cancer. Compared to the general population, redheads also reportedly: have more sex, have "sexier" scents, have more acidic skin mantles, have better immune systems, have fewer hairs on their heads, have thicker individual strands of hair, need more anesthetic, need fewer pain killers, feel temperature related pain more, yet withstand heat longer, feel electric pain less, have higher tolerances for pain (generally), produce more Vitamin D, produce and access adrenalin faster, and are better able to withstand breastfeeding. Finally, listicles also claim that redheads are "mutants" (because of the genetic mutation they carry on the MC1R gene) and are genetically related to Neanderthals. There were no identifiable patterns in terms of which claims were made by the science-centered publications, versus the general ones.



#### 4.4.2.2 Citations

Citations, or lack of, across the scientific and general publications were also similar. Across all the listicles, the most common way to introduce a claim was with an extremely vague statement, such as, “research shows,” “a new study found,” or “scientists discovered.” The next most common way to cite the study was to include limited information, such as the year of publication, e.g., “a 2009 study found,” an institution associated with the study, “a McGill University study showed,” or one detail about the methods, such as, “130,000 people were followed.” After limited information citations, claims were most often not supported at all. In other words, claims were made as general knowledge, such as “redheads need 20 percent more anesthesia than their dark-headed counterparts.” Surprisingly, science-gearred publications actually made such claims, without any citation at all, more often than the general interest publications. Next, occasionally listicles included links to other popular press articles about the findings, or quotes were taken from such articles to support the claims in the listicles I analyzed. Finally, the least common manner of citation was full citation. Only six out of sixty-seven total individual claims included enough information given to count as a full citation, i.e., linking to the original study published online, or including the investigator’s name, place, and year of publication.

#### 4.4.2.3 Visual aspects

Finally, I also analyzed the listicles’ images and visual layouts. The most obvious pattern was that redheaded models or actresses were featured in a prominent part of the page, usually at the

top center. Six out of the seven listicles featured such an image. Typically, they are posed in a sexualized manner. The exception still featured a close-up image of a young redheaded girl, similarly located on the page's layout. The inclusion of these images reasserts the idea that the redhead is a feminized subject position. Importantly, the only article that includes the word "ginger" in the title includes some men alongside model Jessica Shailes. Interestingly, the titles used "redhead" more often than ginger. The use of redhead here seems counterintuitive, because the insistence on biological difference supports the specific creation of the ginger as an Other figure. However, since online publications rely on clicks for advertising revenue, they likely use images of attractive women to garner attention. Within popular culture, these women are considered redheads, not gingers. This example emphasizes how use of the terms ginger and redhead are not always consistent and that the categories are mutable. Other types of images featured in the listicles include GIFs and memes, historical images, and stock photos.

4.4.2.3.1 *GIFS*. GIFs and memes were used to add both humor and visual evidence to a particular "fact" included in the listicle. Sometimes they included famous redheaded individuals, such as an image of Ed Sheeran, that accompanied the claim that redheads are less susceptible to pain. At other times, they were entirely unrelated to red hair. For instance, a GIF of Joey from the sitcom *Friends* overlaid with text stating, "Ross bruises like a peach. He bruises like a peach" accompanied the claim that, "redheaded women [bruise] a lot easier than women of other hair colours." Likewise, alongside the claim that "redheads enjoy more sex," one listicle included a picture of Austin Powers.

Since I have already analyzed memes at length in other chapters, I will focus here on GIFS. GIFs, looping moving images that typically have unknown authors, are not a new media

form (individuals used them somewhat similarly in the early and mid 1990s as they do today), but they have recently experienced a resurgence. Such resurgence is part of other popular internet trends, including nostalgia for the early web and the ugly internet aesthetic.<sup>120</sup> Carolyn Kane argues that part of the reason that GIFs have lasted is due to their technological profile: they are low-resolution files that are easy to compress, accessible to a variety of browser speeds, and (recently) compatible with most platforms.<sup>121</sup> Within online culture today, as Jason Eppink describes, GIFs have, “an ethos, a utility, an evolving context, a set of aesthetics.”<sup>122</sup> People often share GIFs online to communicating identity and form groups.<sup>123</sup> People also use GIFs in online discourse to express affect and show off cultural competency in a particular area, typically of popular culture or mass media.<sup>124</sup>

A GIF is successful when it becomes an “essential part of a cultural conversation,” resulting in new digital slang.<sup>125</sup> The incorporation of GIFs into listicles, a trend that Eppink claims started with *Buzzfeed*, represents a visual form of digital slang. However, GIFs typically come from fictional media and therefore do not fit particularly well with the listicle’s ethos of “facts.” Additionally, GIFs have also been coopted by media corporations like *Buzzfeed*, and thus have become highly commercialized.<sup>126</sup> Spread of scientific information by corporatized entities, as described above, often resorts to simplification of information. Therefore, GIFs’ simultaneous

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<sup>120</sup> Jason Eppink, “A Brief History of the GIF (So Far),” *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (December 1, 2014): 298; Kate M. Miltner and Tim Highfield, “Never Gonna GIF You Up: Analyzing the Cultural Significance of the Animated GIF,” *Social Media + Society* 3, no. 3 (2017): 3.

<sup>121</sup> Carolyn L. Kane, “GIFs That Glitch: Eyeball Aesthetics for the Attention Economy,” *Communication Design* 4, no. 1–2 (2016): 49.

<sup>122</sup> Eppink, “A Brief History of the GIF (So Far),” 298.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> Miltner and Highfield, “Never Gonna GIF You UP,” 2-3.

<sup>125</sup> Eppink, “A Brief History of the GIF (So Far),” 301 .

<sup>126</sup> Miltner and Highfield, “Never Gonna GIF You UP,” 8.

positions as humorous visual commentary, evidentiary support, and marketing material are contradictory.

GIFs are not a defining part of the ginger meme directly. Though there are plenty of GIFs tagged as “ginger” or “redhead,”<sup>127</sup> image macros (memes) have been much more responsible for typifying redheads. The reliance on image macros rather than GIFs within the ginger phenomenon is likely due to the fact that the processes behind creating the two media forms are different. On the one hand, GIFs are exemplary of both convergence and participatory culture in that they are typically made by people who edit clips of films or television shows into this new format, and then add text representing dialogue from the original clip. Editors may amplify or emphasize something humorous in a GIF, but most often the humor already existed in the clip’s original form. Additionally, the previously described underrepresentation of redheaded men in mainstream film and television, as well as redheaded women’s propensity to be portrayed in limiting ways, means there are fewer options of redheaded experiences to GIF-ify in the first place. Ginger memes on the other hand, often rely on editing the physical appearances of non-famous individuals or stock photos (described more in the next section) and using humor developed through bricolage and poaching.<sup>128</sup> Even though memes are more popular within the ginger phenomenon, GIFs are still important because they are used heavily in listicle formats, and listicles themselves are a significant part of the ginger meme.

4.4.2.3.2 *Stock photographs*. In addition to GIFs, most listicles also included vaguely scientific or medical stock images. Importantly, these images do not necessarily match well with the claim

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<sup>127</sup> See, for example: <https://giphy.com/search/ginger>; <https://giphy.com/search/redhead>.

<sup>128</sup> Milner, *The World Made Meme*, 64.

they are meant to illustrate. For example, an image of a redheaded woman touching her temple, sitting across from a doctor, accompanies the claim that redheaded women have an increased risk of endometriosis. Endometriosis would typically cause abdominal or pelvic pain, not headaches. An image of two redheaded boys in green and white striped shirts, perhaps brothers, illustrates that claim that congenital melanocytic naevi (a potentially severe form of birthmarks) are more likely in redheaded people. The boys do not have any signs of birthmarks. Even more removed, a graphic of a brain visible through a person's head against a sci-fi-esque background sits above text explaining that redheads have an increased risk of Parkinson's disease.

Paul Frosh defines a stock photograph as a “‘generic image’, a ready-made photograph designed for multiple reuse in diverse advertising and marketing contexts, manufactured by an industry known as stock photography.”<sup>129</sup> With the increase in available digital technologies, the stock photography industry has transformed into the “visual content” industry, which includes graphic design, and more highly edited images.<sup>130</sup> Jose van Dijck suggests that soon (or perhaps already) the idea of a “doctored” photograph will no longer have resonance, because editing (broadly defined) is so ubiquitous within digital image culture.<sup>131</sup> Such images, often overlooked by both researchers and individuals in their everyday lives, are important to analyze because they play a huge role in constructing consumer culture.<sup>132</sup> However, listicles and other new formats that have arisen in popular internet culture, such as memes, make use of stock images differently

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<sup>129</sup> Paul Frosh, “Rhetorics of the Overlooked: On the Communicative Modes of Stock Advertising Images,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2, no. 2 (2002): 172.

<sup>130</sup> Paul Frosh, “Digital Technology and Stock Photography: And God Created Photoshop,” in *Image Ethics in the Digital Age*, ed. Larry P. Gross, John Stuart Katz, and Jay Ruby (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 184.

<sup>131</sup> José van Dijck, “Digital Photography: Communication, Identity, Memory,” *Visual Communication* 7, no. 1 (2008): 71.

<sup>132</sup> Frosh, “Rhetorics of the Overlooked,” 173.

from their intended purpose of being sold to advertise a wide-range of products. Within listicles, these images are used to provide visual interest, or add additional evidence to support claims. Given the nature of how stock images are created, however, it is impossible for them to act as evidence; even illustration is a broad stretch. Stock images are intentionally created to be as polysemous as possible. Christopher Grant Ward suggests they should be conceptualized as “filler content,” or content whose goal is in fact to present an “ambiguous message.”<sup>133</sup> Stock images are widely *classified*—to increase the likelihood that a potential buyer would find an image across many search terms—and they also *classify*; they create a typification of kinds of people, events, emotions, etc. for use by advertisers.<sup>134</sup> In contrast, medical studies are typically about hyper-specific topics. However, from the stock images used in these listicles, readers could make any number of interpretations, such as a doctor’s concern, a patient’s pain, or even the results of brain imaging. Through a Google Reverse Image Search, I found that these images were used in such varied contexts as explaining cell phone addiction (the brain image), the basis for an “Asian Ginger Baby” meme (the image of two children) and advertising for a Vietnamese hospital (the image of the doctor and patient), amongst many others. Images that invoke the authority of medicine or science, with no actual meaning behind them, combined with the previously described authority of the list, can lead to false messages about risks of red hair. As Frosh explains, stock images’ “master discourse is rhetoric, not science; their institutional context advertising, not journalism.”<sup>135</sup> Therefore, the integration of stock photography and graphic design into listicles which purport to be journalism is concerning.

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<sup>133</sup> Christopher Grant Ward, “Stock Images, Filler Content and the Ambiguous Corporate Message Ambiguous Raw Material: The Stock Industry as a Culture of Noise,” *M/C Journal* 10, no. 5 (2007): 2.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

4.4.2.3.3 *Historical images*. Finally, some listicles included also historical images. An image of Boudicca, the warrior queen of the Iceni people, for example, accompanied the claim that redheads produce adrenaline more quickly than other people. Such inclusions, however, were uncommon in listicles specifically about the science of red hair, though they are popularly included in listicles that take a more historical or mythological focus.

Overall, the format of the listicle, broken down into easily digestible and numbered “facts,” as is often claimed in titles, offers a false air of expert knowledge. As Hall said, lists, as an iconic part of Western culture, bespeak authority. When combined with the assumed authority of science, this is dangerous. Additionally, listicles circulate widely and freely. All of these qualities contribute to the understanding of redheaded people as genetically different or mutant.

#### **4.4.3 Narrators’ encounters with redheaded science on social media**

Unsurprisingly, the primary way that my narrators learned about redheaded science was through listicles or popular news interpretations of scientific studies that circulate on social media. Many of them found it a kind of bonding experience to share with other redheaded friends or family members. Kari, for example, stated that her friends “tag redheaded stuff for me” on Facebook.<sup>136</sup> Andii and his sister also sent links back and forth on Facebook and via email.<sup>137</sup> In talking about how she and her father share such information, Caitlin explained that:

I think the thing that we’ve talked about a lot and have found articles about, is if you go to the dentist, needing more Novocain, that kind of thing and it’s like, you go to the dentist and say, ‘well just give me, go ahead and do the 2 shots first,

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<sup>136</sup> Steve O’Shea, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>137</sup> Andii Bowsher, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Edinburgh, UK, August 5, 2015.

let's not even bother waiting because I know the one won't work.' We've [she and her father] read articles about that, since you notice it.

Caitlin specifically sought out and shared articles that explained a phenomenon she had noticed about herself. During their conversation, Caitlin's father also remembered a clip of *MythBusters* that had circulated via links to YouTube some years prior.

There's a *Mythbusters* episode about the whole myth that redheads actually cannot withstand as much pain and they did a test and the one guy on *Mythbusters* who's kind of red, he did a test and they were trying to figure out how to torture people without hurting them. It came down to putting your arm in a bucket of ice, ice water, and the way it worked out was, that it turns out, redheads actually have a higher threshold of pain, from their study. So yeah, that was kind of interesting. And I don't know if it ties into the whole idea that we need more anesthesia, which I've heard before.<sup>138</sup>

In the *Mythbusters* episode, which is dedicated to questions about how well various groups tolerate pain, the myth is stated as "redheads can't stand very much pain at all."<sup>139</sup> The hosts test redheads' ability to withstand cold by dunking their arms in ice water for a maximum of three minutes. They are allowed to remove their arm early if the pain is too intense. The *Mythbusters* "bust" this myth, claiming that redheads actually performed much better and were able to tolerate the cold longer, than non-redheads. Of course this is not a peer-reviewed academic study, and there are many ways in which outside variables could have affected the results. For instance, the redheaded participants all knew what was being tested before they started. Additionally, several redheaded men are shown affecting a macho performance, perhaps to combat the nerdy, weak stereotypes typically associated with them, which could have encouraged them to remain in the cold water longer than they would have otherwise.

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<sup>138</sup> Caitlin Schanno, oral history interview by Donica O'Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>139</sup> "No Pain, No Gain," *Mythbusters*, <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2n9m24>.



Like Caitlyn and Steve, Andy was also interested in the science of red hair, but did not share articles with friends or family members; rather, he described his online research as “self-directed.”

There’s the kind of routine click-bait that comes up every like couple months, ‘10 Things About Red Hair You Didn’t Know’ and I just really wish they were expounded on and further understood because I think there’s like hints there and I always end up telling people about it because they’re like “well red hair’s cool blah blah blah and I tan” and I’m like you just don’t quite understand, I literally have a different skin type.<sup>140</sup>

Andy also noticed that these clickbait articles are often lacking in information and at times present contradictory findings, as Angela noted before. He continued by saying:

I just wish that were understood within our own community as a form of solidarity. I think that it’s beginning to happen, so I do follow it, like there’s stuff with heat, with cold, and what is the other one, anesthetics and stuff, but I do follow it, but there’s just not a whole lot to grasp – there’s not a lot of meat to chew. You look at the Wikipedia and it’s like “oh it’s been suggested” and I’m like “cool.”<sup>141</sup>

Such limited content is the result of poor translation from scientific journals to popular news formats, often undergirded by profit motives. As Nelly Oudshoorn explains, when scientific research is translated into press bulletins, context, specificity, and intent are often lost.

Furthermore, press coverage of science tends to focus on cultural implications of whatever “breakthrough” is reported, rather than the actual scientific findings.<sup>142</sup> In this case then, news articles and listicles about redhead science are always implicated in perpetuating the ginger

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<sup>140</sup> Andy Haverkamp, oral history interview by Donica O’Malley, Portland, OR, May 21, 2016.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Nelly Oudshoorn, “On Masculinities, Technologies, and Pain: The Testing of Male Contraceptives in the Clinic and the Media,” *Science, Technologies, and Human Values* 24, no. 2 (1999): 265–89.

meme and gingers' representations as both biologically and socially different—the data and conclusions of the studies become less important than reasserting difference.

#### 4.5 THE “REAL” SCIENCE OF RED HAIR

In 2011, the UK's NHS began a media and scientific literacy series called, “Behind the Headlines,” in which researchers compare peer-reviewed evidence to claims made by mainstream press.<sup>143</sup> The series is now co-hosted on the National Institute of Health's National Library of Medicine's website and available in the US. The analysis proceeds in seven steps. First, the authors identify major headlines. Secondly, they ask, where did the story come from (what is the original scientific source)? Having established the source, they ask what type of research it was, and what methods were used in the study? Next, they identify the basic results and situate them in the researchers' interpretation of the results. Finally, they compare the researchers' findings to the media's claims. On March 7, 2017, “Behind the Headlines” took on the case of the “ginger gene” in the specific context of its supposed increased risk to Parkinson's disease.<sup>144</sup> Writers from “Behind the Headlines” note that outlets like the *Daily Mail* proclaimed that, “Redheads are more likely to develop Parkinson's.” However, the original study, published in the *Annals of Neurology*, analyzed only mice, not people. Researchers found that mice with an inactive MC1R gene (“turned off” by researchers) had progressive movement problems.

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<sup>143</sup> “Behind the Headlines Policy and Process,” *NHS Choices*, April 12, 2015, <https://www.nhs.uk/aboutNHSChoices/aboutnhschoices/Aboutus/Pages/produce-behind-headlines.aspx>.

<sup>144</sup> “Is Red Hair Gene Linked to Increased Risk of Parkinson's?” *PubMed Health - Behind the Headlines*, March 7, 2017, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/behindtheheadlines/news/2017-03-07-is-red-hair-gene-linked-to-increased-risk-of-parkinsons/>.

Therefore, the study's major finding was that drugs targeting MC1R might be productive for treating Parkinson's disease. However, news reporting undermined the complexity of how Parkinson's disease is currently conceptualized, diminished the researchers' uncertainty about whether redheads actually have a greater risk of developing the disease, and framed the study as though it were a comparison of incidences of Parkinson's disease within each hair color.

Not all of the claims made about redheaded people are completely without substance. Reports that people with red hair are more sensitive to pain caused by cold and that they need more anesthetics, are well-supported in scientific literature, for example.<sup>145</sup> However, many of the claims reported in popular press and new media formats are either based on varying degrees of misinterpretation of scientific studies or based on popular myths about redheads. The cases that I chose to examine in more depth here represent misinterpretations (broadly defined) of scientific publications. I chose these cases because they are popularly referenced online and because they can be traced back to specific scientific publications, against which I could compare mediated claims. Following the format from "Behind the Headlines," I will now analyze mainstream media claims about the relationships between red hair and endometriosis, red hair and aging, and red hair and sexual activity.

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<sup>145</sup> Edwin B. Liem et al., "Increased Sensitivity to Thermal Pain and Reduced Subcutaneous Lidocaine Efficacy in Redheads," *Anesthesiology* 102, no. 3 (2005): 509-14; Jeffrey Mogil et al., "The Melanocortin-1 Receptor Gene Mediates Female-Specific Mechanisms of Analgesia in Mice and Humans," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 100, no. 8 (2003): 4867-4872; Edwin B. Liem et al., "Anesthetic Requirement is Increased in Redheads," *Anesthesiology* 101, no. 2 (2004): 279-83; Catherine J. Binkley et al., "Genetic Variations Associated with Red Hair Color and Fear of Dental Pain, Anxiety Regarding Dental Care and Avoidance of Dental Care," *Journal of the American Dental Association* 140, no. 7 (2009): 896-905.

### 4.5.1 Endometriosis

Numerous online publications across the Anglo American world, such as newspapers like *Wales Online*, the *Calgary Herald*, and popular culture sites like *The Frisky* and *Odyssey Online*, in addition to the previously cited listicles, have claimed that redheaded women experience increased risk of endometriosis.<sup>146</sup> These claims were based on a 2006 study by Dr. Stacey Missmer, et al. published in *Fertility and Sterility*.<sup>147</sup> The study, “Natural Hair Color and the Incidence of Endometriosis,” analyzed 90,065 women over time to determine whether they were diagnosed with endometriosis through laparoscopic surgery, and whether their hair color was a risk factor for diagnosis.<sup>148</sup> In this case, in contrast to the Parkinson’s disease study, researchers did attempt to discover the incidence of this condition across natural hair color groups. The group of women was from the Nurses’ Health Study II, a longitudinal study of a cohort of nurses, designed to study risk factors for chronic diseases in women.<sup>149</sup> Overall, the researchers

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<sup>146</sup> See for example, “We Shouldn’t be Taking the Ginger Hair Myth as Red,” *Wales Online*, December 10, 2012, <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/shouldnt-taking-ginger-hair-myth-1879479>; Peter Nieman, “Red-Haired People Face Unique Health Issues,” *Calgary Herald*, April 13, 2017, <http://calgaryherald.com/health/family-child/dr-peter-nieman-red-haired-people-face-unique-health-issues>; Julie Gerstein, “Study: Redheads Feel Pain Differently,” *The Frisky*, March 3, 2012, <http://www.thefrisky.com/2012-03-06/study-redheads-feel-pain-differently>; Miranda Jean Halpin, “Welcome To the World of Redhead Syndrome,” *The Odyssey Online*, June 28, 2016, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/welcome-to-the-world-of-redhead-syndrome>.

<sup>147</sup> Stacey Missmer, et al., “Natural Hair Color and the Incidence of Endometriosis,” *Fertility and Sterility*, 85, no. 4 (2006): 856-870.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 868.

<sup>149</sup> Study designers selected a cohort of nurses because they thought their medical training would help them fill out at-times complicated surveys with a high degree of accuracy and also that their interest in medicine would encourage them to continue with the longitudinal aspect of the study. “About NHS,” *Nurses Health Study*, last modified 2016, <http://www.nhs3.org/index.php/info/who-can-join?layout=edit>. Neither the above study, nor the website for the program comments upon how sampling from this particular population might affect results.

did not observe any significant relation between hair color and the rate of endometriosis.<sup>150</sup> However, they did find that when controlling for infertility, amongst women who had *not* experienced infertility, the rates of endometriosis in redheaded women were slightly higher than in other hair colors.<sup>151</sup> The most important implications of the study were that there may be a connection between red hair and coagulation (which has since been disproven)<sup>152</sup> or red hair and some type of immune dysfunction.<sup>153</sup>

Mainstream reporting did not typically acknowledge that red hair was a risk factor only when controlling for infertility. Importantly, as well, the researchers recognize two major issues with their findings. First, endometriosis is a differential diagnosis that typically takes time to reach, potentially resulting in infertility. The higher rates of endometriosis in women without fertility problems, versus those with such problems, do not correlate with how the disease normally progresses.<sup>154</sup> Secondly, out of the entire sample, only four women with red hair were diagnosed with concurrent infertility and endometriosis.<sup>155</sup> In addition to the limitations offered by the researchers, I also note that the definitional criteria for the two categories regarding fertility are “did not report infertility” and “concurrent infertility,” rather than fertility vs. infertility.<sup>156</sup> The study also did not control for previous pregnancies or births. Therefore, the category of women who “did not report infertility” is those who have not been *diagnosed* with infertility, not necessarily women who may potentially be “infertile.” Furthermore, the vague diagnosis of

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<sup>150</sup> Missmer, et al., “Natural Hair Color and the Incidence of Endometriosis,” 868.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> Edwin B. Liem et al., “Women with Red Hair Report a Slightly Increased Rate of Bruising but Have Normal Coagulation Tests,” *Anesthesia and Analgesia* 102, no. 1 (2006): 313-318.

<sup>153</sup> Missmer, et al., “Natural Hair Color and the Incidence of Endometriosis,” 870.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

infertility, especially “unexplained infertility,” itself has been critiqued, both by activists for women’s healthcare and by medical professionals.<sup>157</sup> Not surprisingly, none of these complicating factors are discussed in any of the mainstream press about this study, which simplifies the findings into the claim that redheaded women are more likely to suffer from endometriosis than women with other hair colors.

#### 4.5.2 Aging

A second attribute often linked to red hair in popular press is delayed or reduced visual signs of aging. As was the case with the endometriosis example, the idea that redheaded people’s genetic makeup helps them look younger longer was mentioned in several listicles and has been widely reported in mainstream online news outlets such as UK-based the *Telegraph*, *BBC News*, the *Guardian*, and US-based *Bustle*, *Newsweek*, and *Women’s Health Magazine*, amongst many others.<sup>158</sup> Such reporting made claims like, “the latest findings are particularly good news for

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<sup>157</sup> See for example, Norbert Gleicher and David Barad, “Unexplained Infertility: Does it Really Exist?” *Human Reproduction* 21, no. 8 (2006): 1951-1955; Tarek A. Gelbaya and Potdar Neelam, “Definition and Epidemiology of Unexplained Infertility,” *Obstetrical and Gynecological Survey* 69, no. 2 (2014): 109-115; Mohammad Reza Sadeghi, “Unexplained Infertility, the Controversial Matter in Management of Infertile Couples,” *Journal of Reproduction & Infertility* 16, no. 1 (2015): 109-115.

<sup>158</sup> Henry Bodkin, “Ginger Gene Helps You to Look Two Years Younger,” *Telegraph*, April 29, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2016/04/29/ginger-gene-helps-you-to-look-two-years-younger>; James Gallagher, “‘Secret’ of Youthful Looks in Ginger Gene,” *BBC News*, April 29, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/health-36133475>; Ian Sample, “Gene Linked to Youthful Looks has Been Discovered, Scientists Claim,” *Guardian*, April 28, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/apr/28/gene-linked-to-youthful-looks-has-been-discovered-scientists-claim>; Macaela Mackenzie, “Women with This Gene Variation Should Stop Blowing Their Money on Anti-Aging Products,” Claire Warner, “Do Redheads Look Younger? Study Says They’re More Likely To Age Gracefully,” *Bustle*, May 1, 2016, <https://www.bustle.com/articles/158059-do-redheads-look-younger-study-says-theyre-more-likely-to-age-gracefully>; Lucy Clarke-Billings, “‘Ginger Gene’ Makes People Look Younger

redheads, as the data suggests they may be ageing slower”<sup>159</sup> and, “a gene that helps you stay looking young has been identified—and it’s the same one that produces red hair and fair skin. Those with the variant of the gene look on average two years younger than they actually are.”<sup>160</sup>

The original scientific source was a paper entitled “The MC1R Gene and Youthful Looks,” which was published in *Current Biology*, in May 2016.<sup>161</sup> Fan Liu et al. analyzed single nucleotide polymorphisms, which are the most common type of genetic variation between people, in 2,693 elderly Dutch people from the Rotterdam study.<sup>162</sup> The researchers then compared the genetic variations they found with the difference between people’s real age and their perceived age by others.<sup>163</sup> The primary results were that individuals who were homozygous carriers of certain variants of the MC1R gene, including those responsible for the physical expression of red hair, looked, on average, about two years older than people without them. Individuals that were heterozygote carriers, or had only one copy of a particular mutation, looked, on average, one year older.<sup>164</sup> The wider implications of the study were that it may

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Than They Are,” *Newsweek*, April 29, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/ginger-gene-makes-you-look-younger-you-are-453804>; *Women’s Health Magazine*, April 29, 2016, <https://www.womenshealthmag.com/beauty/mc1r-gene-aging>. While *Women’s Health* doesn’t name redheads, it features an image of a young redheaded woman underneath the title, implying that it is their “genetic variation” to which the title refers.

<sup>159</sup> Bodkin, “Ginger Gene Helps.”

<sup>160</sup> Clarke-Billings, “Ginger Gene.”

<sup>161</sup> Fan Liu, “The MC1R Gene and Youthful Looks,” *Current Biology* 26, no. 9 (2016): 1213-20.

<sup>162</sup> The Rotterdam study was a prospective cohort study of a group of elderly adults living in Rotterdam, Netherlands. The study’s goals were to “investigate the risk factors of cardiovascular, neurological, ophthalmological, and endocrine diseases in the elderly.” Between 1989 and 2008, 45,000 participants were recruited. “The Rotterdam Study,” *University Medical Center Rotterdam*, accessed January 1, 2018, <http://www.epib.nl/research/ergo.htm>.

<sup>163</sup> Perceived age was measured in the original Rotterdam study, not in the study discussed here. It was determined by 27 assessors who looked at images of each participant from both the front and the side.

<sup>164</sup> Liu, et al., “The MC1R Gene,” 1214.

provide further insight into the biological processes involved in facial-aging, as well as the methodological usefulness of perceived age-prediction that is based on genotypes.<sup>165</sup>

Strangely, popular press reported nearly the exact opposite of the study's finding. The reporting on this study represents more than a minor misinterpretation, but rather the presentation of objectively false information. Headlines like "'Secret' of Youthful Looks in Ginger Gene," "Ginger Gene Helps You to Look Two Years Younger," and "'Ginger Gene' Makes People Look Younger Than They Are," are factually incorrect. First, the misnomer of "ginger gene," for MC1R, a gene that all humans share, is misleading, as previously described. Second, even if one were to interpret "ginger gene" to mean not the MC1R gene itself, but rather the particular variants or mutations responsible for the physical expression of red hair, then the "ginger gene" actually resulted in people looking an average of two years older than their true age. Thus, popular press described the opposite of the study's results.

Furthermore, the "conflict of interest" section of the publication names three of the co-authors as employees of Unilever, a personal care product company, and states that, "this work could potentially promote the use of anti-aging products and lead to financial gain for Unilever."<sup>166</sup> From the dates of these articles, which are sometimes linked to as evidence or citations in listicles, I assume that the majority of articles was based on a press release by Unilever. On April 29, 2016, Unilever Global Company published a press release to their website titled, "Anti-Ageing Breakthrough—Scientists Discover a Gene of Youthful Looks."<sup>167</sup> It is likely, therefore, that the authors of the above described articles did not read the actual

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 1218.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> "Anti-Ageing Breakthrough - Scientists Discover a Gene of Youthful Looks," *Unilever Global Company Website*, April 29, 2016, <https://www.unilever.com/news/Press-releases/2016/Anti-ageing-breakthrough-scientists-discover-a-gene-of-youthful-looks.html>.



study, but rather, just the press release. The press release, however, offers a simplified, but still accurate version of the findings by stating that researchers “discovered that individuals with one form of a gene called MC1R looked two years older than those with a different form.” At no time does the press release refer to red hair, nor the “ginger gene,” and therefore, of course does not state that redheaded people look younger than their counterparts. Thus, it is likely that recurrent reduction of the term MC1R to mean “red hair” in mainstream press, generally, has conflated popular understanding of the gene itself with the hair color red, as seen in the articles analyzed here. The aging case is different from many others, in that it could be interpreted as ascribing positive genetic qualities to redheads or gingers, but it affirms a difference, nonetheless.

#### **4.5.3 “Redheads Have More Sex”**

In addition to the findings and patterns presented above, there were other inconsistencies in both listicle and popular news reporting on these issues. As previously mentioned, I could not do a comparative analysis of some of the claims about red hair with the scientific literature, because it was not possible to identify the original scientific source. As described above, when there is a non-citation, a claim is accompanied by a vague statement like “research shows,” or “it has been discovered.” There was one case, however, in which a researcher’s name and institution were given, but no report indicated the title of the original research study, nor where it was published. It was widely reported across multiple media formats that, “redheads have the most sex” and that

they are “the best in the sheets.”<sup>168</sup> Links to “the study” (or studies as the above cited *Pretty 52* piece implies) were provided in many publications, yet they merely relink to one of myriad popular press pieces that quote still other popular press pieces on the topic. The most popularly linked story is “Redheads ‘Have More Sex than Blondes or Brunettes’” by the *Daily Mail*.<sup>169</sup> External sites sometimes claim that the author of the study, Werner Habermehl, did an interview with the *Daily Mail*, but the article merely offers a quote by Habermehl, introduced with the words, “He said...” which does not necessarily mean that there was an interview. Reporters describe the methodology alternately as surveys and interviews done with “hundreds” of redheads, who are sometimes specified as women, and sometimes not. Furthermore, Dr. Werner Habermehl, who did publish on issues of sexuality from the early 1970s through the 1990s, died in 2013.<sup>170</sup> His last published academic research on sexuality that I could locate was from 1998; yet, stories ranging from 2006—2018 describe these claims as being from “a new study.”<sup>171</sup>

The name of the research center where the study allegedly took place is alternately cited as “Hamburg Medical Research Institute,” and “Hamburg Research Institute,” neither of which exist in English, nor as directly translated into German. Specific research institutes in Hamburg

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<sup>168</sup> “Who Says Blondes Have More Fun?” *Fox News*, August 16, 2006, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2006/08/16/who-says-blondes-have-more-fun.html>; Jess Hardiman, “Redheads Are Apparently Better In Bed, According To Studies,” *Pretty 52*, December 6, 2017, <http://www.pretty52.com/topical/funny-engaging-life-redheads-are-apparently-better-in-bed-according-to-studies-20171206>.

<sup>169</sup> “Redheads ‘Have More Sex than Blondes or Brunettes,’” *Daily Mail*, August 15, 2006, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-400779/Redheads-sex-blondes-brunettes.html>.

<sup>170</sup> The German libertarian publication, *EF Magazin*, reported an obituary for Habermehl in 2013: “Werner Habermehl ist Tot,” *EF Magazin*, August 16, 2013, <https://ef-magazin.de/2013/08/16/4397-abschied-werner-habermehl-ist-tot>.

<sup>171</sup> A book of Habermehl’s work was published in 2005, but it is a “handbook for voyeurs” published by a press specializing in “banned” content, not an academic study: Werner Habermehl, *Handbook für Voyeure: Das Erotische Sammelurium* (Munich, GR: Europa-Verlag, 2005).

have existed over the past decade for topics like epidemiology, but across the press, Habermehl himself is referred to as a “sexologist,” “scientist,” “sociologist,” and a “sex researcher and professor.” The terms “Hamburg Medical Research Institute,” and the “Hamburg Research Institute” can in fact only be found in press alongside claims allegedly derived from this study. The most similar research center name that exists today is the Hamburg Institute for Social Research.<sup>172</sup> However, the HISR lists no record of Dr. Werner Habermehl, nor has any of his studies archived. It remains unclear where and when this study of comparative hair color and sexual activity was published, what its findings were, and whether it actually existed at all. Of particular note is the fact that Dr. Habermehl was “cited” by the (typically fake) *Weekly World News* tabloid twice, in April and in September of 2004, with claims that sexual activity increases IQ-level.<sup>173</sup> For context, the headline on the next page after the April 2004 story reads, “UFO Expert: ETs Not Here to Help Mankind...Space Aliens Smoke Pot and Love to Dance Disco!” Even Jacky Colliss’s otherwise well-cited, *Red: A History of the Redhead*, simply describes Habermehl’s study as “much-cited,” without giving additional information about it.

Most of Habermehl’s works are available in only one or two libraries worldwide and he published almost exclusively in German. Despite access to the resources of two major research universities, and their interlibrary loan partnerships, I was only able to find a record of a physical copy of one of Habermehl’s academic works on sexuality in the US. When I went to retrieve this item from the Boston Public Library, I was told it was missing. Even after a “special search” was initiated by the archival staff, it could not be located. I cannot prove, nor am I intending to prove,

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<sup>172</sup> “Hamburg Institut für Sozialforschung,” *Hamburg Institut für Sozialforschung*, accessed January 2, 2018, <https://www.his-online.de>.

<sup>173</sup> “Sex Boosts Your IQ – Scientist Says,” *Weekly World News*, April 26, 2004; “Sex Boosts Your Grades,” *Weekly World News*, September 13, 2004.

that this comparative study does not exist, nor that it never existed. Dr. Werner Habermehl, who, as previously mentioned, died in 2013, was a sociologist and did publish on issues of sexuality from the 1970s-1990s (though his affiliation is listed on publications as the University of Bielefeld in Germany, not the Hamburg Medical Research Institute, or other variations of this title).<sup>174</sup> It is possible that this study exists and has not been digitally archived, or was improperly recorded. It is also possible that the attribution of the research institution was applied incorrectly at some point, and never corrected. My larger concern, especially when considering how misinformation has spread from the studies discussed above, is that reporters and social media users recirculate these “findings” frequently in popular online news, without ever fact-checking them. Subsequently, misinformation spreads from popular press to blogs, and even further in other new media formats, like listicles and memes.

There are several implications from this kind of reporting. First, it contributes to the lack of clarity and accuracy in mainstream media’s reporting on scientific news, generally. The standard for popular press, and or even purported science-interest press, reporting of academic and scientific research is extremely low, as seen in the above examples. Since such news is often translated into new media formats, like listicles, memes, or GIFs, people circulate it without considering the original the source of the information. Second, unlike many of the scientific claims about redheads, this claim is not based on genetic evidence, but rather, on self-reported behavior.<sup>175</sup> However, in media, claims about redheads’ sexual activity are presented alongside claims like those above that seek to define aspects of redheadedness as genetically innate.

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<sup>174</sup> For an example of an article which lists Universität Bielefeld as Habermehl’s affiliation, see Werner Habermehl, “Kommentar zu Klaus Allerbeck, ‘Meßniveau und Analyseverfahren,’” *Zeitschrift Für Soziologie* 8, no. 3 (1979): 309-10.

<sup>175</sup> I assume from the way the research is described as either a “survey” or “interviews” in press, that the answers were reported by the participants themselves.

Listicles, for example, do not distinguish between genetic predispositions to diseases and social behaviors when they claim that “redheads are mutants.”<sup>176</sup> Therefore, the inclusion of these kinds of claims alongside one another come dangerously close to spreading the message that red-haired people’s sexual behavior is a genetically defined trait. At times, articles actually do make this argument, saying, for example, “Believe it or not, the MC1R genes that cause red hair are also responsible for other physical characteristics that make redheaded sex the best ever.”<sup>177</sup>

Third, the reporting of this specific study also reproduces the gender stereotypes described in Chapter Three. Articles on the topic are most often accompanied by images of sexualized redheaded women, further contributing to their stereotypical hypersexualization, while also ignoring the sexuality of redheaded men. Blog posts that summarize, link to, and discuss the articles do the same, and people often start comment threads sharing pornographic images of redheaded women in the comments. In a quote shared in the majority of the publications reporting on this issue, Habermehl states that, “The research shows that the fiery redhead certainly lives up to her reputation.”<sup>178</sup> In this quote, Habermehl both defines “the fiery redhead” specifically as a woman, through his use of “her,” and further entrenches stereotypes about “fieriness” and sexuality. While some articles entirely ignore redheaded men, others invoke the ginger male stereotype. For example, in an article for *NY Press* that reports on Habermehl’s study, Stephanie Sellars writes, “most people agree that the auburn aura doesn’t

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<sup>176</sup> See for example, Zoe Fagan, “10 Warnings about Redheads,” *The Circular*, February 27, 2015, <http://thecircular.org/10-warnings-about-redheads-2>.

<sup>177</sup> Kacie McCoy, “3 Proven Reasons Sex with Redheads is Simply Better,” *She Knows*, February 3, 2016, <http://www.sheknows.com/love-and-sex/articles/1031967/why-sex-with-a-redhead-is-the-best>

<sup>178</sup> See for example, the *Daily Mail* article, which is often described as an “interview” with Habermehl about his research, by blogs and other popular news sites: “Redheads ‘Have More Sex than Blondes or Brunettes.’”

seem to apply to redheaded men. Carrot Top, Danny Bonaduce, Ron Howard, Chuck Norris: not exactly a list of sex symbols.”<sup>179</sup>

The overall findings from many of these scientific studies is that the MC1R gene does play a role in a particular disease, condition, or pattern related to health. However, the MC1R gene is not the “ginger gene” though it has become conflated as such. The genetic name of “MC1R” given to red hair in the popular press lends authority to red hair’s perception as a genetic disorder.

#### 4.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have argued that red hair is pathologized and that discourses labeling red hair as a biological genetic mutation legitimize the perceived social strangeness of gingers. Much of this perception owes to the systematic deletion of uncertainty and sensationalism in press about breakthroughs in genetic science. New media formats, especially listicles in that they are overly-concise and often lacking in citations, further contribute to the spread of misinformation about the science of red hair. Online discourses about the genetics of red hair also often reinscribe gendered stereotypes.

Foster and Sharp argue that a potential concern of human genetic science is:

the construction of new social categories, such as communities of persons who share genetically based disease susceptibilities or genetically based drug or environmental responses (or lack of response). These new social categories also could be subjected to discrimination and stigma.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Stephanie Sellars, “Lust Life: Red Hot Redheads,” *NY Press*, November 14, 2014, <http://www.nypress.com/lust-life-red-hot-redheads>.

<sup>180</sup> Foster and Sharp, 848.

Gingers have been constructed as such a category, as seen in this chapter. The public perception of gingers as Other did not come entirely from genetic science, but genetic science's institutional authority did legitimize already circulating discourses about Otherness, especially weakness and hypersexuality. In the next chapter, I will explain how the construction of the ginger as Other in new media through discourses of gender and science has particularly dangerous implications when they coincide with discourses of race.

## 5.0 (PSEUDO)RACIALIZED GINGERS

A few years ago, I presented on Kick a Ginger Day at an academic conference. After giving detailed feedback to my two co-panelists on their papers, the panel respondent turned to me and said, “I’ve never heard of this before. It’s a new group of people I get to hate. So where can I kick them? In the shins? In the head?” As about half of the audience laughed uncomfortably, and the other half looked confused, one person waved his hand aggressively, asking to be called on. He did not have a question, but rather, wanted to inform me that this project was problematic and I was claiming “reverse racism” against white people. I repeated the part of my paper that I had just read, which addressed his concern, and clarified that in no way was I endorsing such claims. I imagine that my physical appearance and ascription as a ginger myself may have influenced his interpretation of my paper.

These two diverse responses after the same talk categorize many similar responses I have received since beginning work on this project. Often people find it either too trivial of an issue to be studied, or they understand it as a call for the plight of the ginger (and thus the white person) to be held on par with that of other racial groups. These responses happen particularly within academic settings. Yes, the ginger phenomenon is problematic in a number of ways. However, that does not mean that it should not be studied. During discussions of whiteness, there is at times a tendency to panic and shut down conversation, without actually interrogating any specific ideas. As Richard Dyer explains, “One wants to acknowledge so much how awful white people have been that one may never get around to examining what exactly they have been, and in particular, how exactly their image has been constructed, its complexities and



contradictions.”<sup>1</sup> The ginger phenomenon offers an opportunity to explore all of these aspects of whiteness as they exist and change in the new media environment.

The ginger phenomenon at its core reflects concerns about whiteness. Whiteness’s power is in its ordinariness and invisibility, and the ginger phenomenon makes whiteness explicitly strange and visible. Therefore, within the phenomenon, there is potential for some subversion of whiteness’s power. However, once the contingencies of whiteness are exposed, the ginger phenomenon becomes interpreted within the online public sphere in four identifiable, but interrelated racial discourses. Each of these interpretations has different implications for addressing the power of white supremacy. In this chapter, I argue that the ginger phenomenon is polysemous and stands in for ideas about whiteness and race within popular culture. With regards to race, gingers are interpreted and positioned in popular discourse in four ways: as a stand-in for whiteness, as a stand in for *any* social difference, as an excessive version of whiteness, and as Other. At times these interpretations get confused in online discourses and often more than one is at play in a single text and its audience responses. The last two sometimes exist on a spectrum. I am not endorsing any of these interpretations; rather, I am claiming that they exist in the online sphere and that analyzing these interpretations can provide insight into how whiteness is reconfigured in new media. I also argue that gingers are subjected to a kind of pseudoracialization through their perceived excessive whiteness, wherein their physical qualities are subjected to typification and biologization, then laid out on a value-laden spectrum, but they are still generally hailed as white and thus do not experience the structural, institutional effects of racism. In this way, the ginger phenomenon represents the Othering, but not the oppression, of whiteness through new media.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 11.

In this chapter, I will first review literature on critical whiteness studies, including its foundational theories, relationships to processes of racialization, and its relevance for considering issues of whiteness in relation to European immigration. I will also consider critiques of critical whiteness studies and address my own project in this context. Then, I will move into an explanation of each of the four interpretations and positionings of the ginger, as described above. For each one, I will address two to three examples. Many of these examples can fit into more than one of the categories, as I will explain.

## 5.1 CRITICAL WHITENESS STUDIES

Given the wide-ranging historical and social power of whiteness, it is a crucial topic to analyze. However, as Linda Martín Alcoff explains, it is also a challenging topic to discuss because of its “difficult past, complicated present, and uncertain future.”<sup>2</sup> Even within academia, discussing whiteness leads to feelings of discomfort and guilt. In an effort to address these issues, the discipline of critical whiteness studies has called for the decentering of whiteness as a natural state. Critical whiteness scholars attempt to show whiteness’s construction as a racial category, just like blackness. By calling attention to the constructed nature of whiteness, these scholars hope to undermine its perceived position as “naturally” superior. As Richard Dyer explains, “the point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power.”<sup>3</sup> Whiteness does not (only) describe physical appearance, but rather describes a social relation, wherein people designated as “white” are at the top of a created racial hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> The physical

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Dyer, *White*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (London: Routledge, 1995), 112.

markers that we interpret as “white” and as “other” depend on what our culture has trained us to see as belonging in each category.<sup>5</sup> The criteria for these categories have stretched and shifted in creative and insidious ways over time, and continue to do so today, in order to accommodate and exclude new groups. As Nell Painter Irvin explains, whiteness is not one singular “enduring concept;” rather, it has maintained its status over time through multiple “enlargements”—always repositioning itself within a black/white dichotomy.<sup>6</sup>

One of the primary ways in which whiteness’s construction has been made visible is through histories of the “whitening” of various European immigrant groups – particularly Irish and Jewish groups, who have been racialized at different times throughout history. Importantly, as discussed in Chapter Two, both of these groups have also been identified historically through red hair. Painter suggests that race is conceptualized through skin color and a black/white binary so deeply in American society, that it can be difficult to understand other systems of racial domination, such as those of the Irish and Jewish.<sup>7</sup> For example, Noel Ignatiev argues that under the British-enforced Penal Code in Ireland, the Irish were an oppressed race, rather than an oppressed ethnic or religious minority.<sup>8</sup> During this time, Celtic groups colonized by England were discussed in explicitly racialized terms and were outlawed from participating in several aspects of society, such as land owning, voting, and many occupations. Prior to this, the English were banned from intermarrying with the Irish, adopting Irish children, or speaking the Irish language.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: WW Norton, 2010), 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 132

<sup>8</sup> Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 35.

<sup>9</sup> Amanda Third, “Does the Rug Match the Carpet?: Race, Gender, and the Redheaded Woman,” in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane C. Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 321-22.

Racial oppression, however, describes the Irish experience only in the Irish and British contexts, not universally. When the Irish immigrated en masse to America, they were still racialized, but in an “in-between” way, not oppressed by “hard racism” but not “welcomed into whiteness” either.<sup>10</sup> Upon arrival, the Irish were not “color conscious,” but because slavery was a mark of blackness, and they appeared white, they were automatically entered into the system of free labor (although at the lowest, unskilled level).<sup>11</sup> Thus, the Irish learned to use their whiteness to their advantage and to distance themselves from blackness, joining with the oppressors. Through labor organizing they redefined unskilled jobs for which there was competition between Irish and Black people, as “white jobs.”<sup>12</sup> Additionally, perhaps the most significant way in which the Irish secured their own whiteness was by aligning with the Democratic, pro-slavery party. In addition to supporting slavery, the Democratic party was anti-nativist, and thus welcomed the Irish as immigrants.<sup>13</sup> When new groups of immigrants arrived in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Irish seemed American by comparison, and their whiteness was, for the most part, solidified.

Discussions of Irish oppression, as will be discussed further in this chapter, are often invoked to legitimize interpretations of gingerism as a serious issue, which sometimes leads to the conflation of gingerism with racism. A major factor in this conflation is the blurring of geographical location, and thus political circumstances. Stories of British colonization of the Irish are distinct from those of discrimination against Irish upon immigrant to the US. Dyer explains this difference in terms of the level of “exploitative relation.” Britain exploited the Irish

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<sup>10</sup> David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 12-13.

<sup>11</sup> Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, 96.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

through colonization; this relationship did not exist in the US. Within the US, Irish immigrants were hailed as white in comparison to black people and Native Americans, and eventually other immigrant groups. In the UK, this process took longer.<sup>14</sup> However, as I have discussed, the differences between such stories do not stay neatly confined to one location, especially when they spread via online discourses. For example, in a message board thread about the origins of gingerism, several people put forth the claim that the roots of gingerism are in anti-Celtic prejudice in the UK. Subsequently, several other commenters apply this to the situation in the US and also Canada. For example, several people hypothesize that anti-Scottish immigrant tensions were the impetus behind Anne Shirley's red hair in *Anne of Green Gables*. Others identify discrimination against Irish immigrants to America as the US version of this origin. One person even insists that the connection is stronger in the US saying, "US anti-redhead prejudice was much more closely linked to anti-Irish racism than in the UK."<sup>15</sup> To be clear, I do not mean to defend the designation of gingerism as racism within the British context, either. I mean to call attention to the use of this argument in the US (or Canada) without any acknowledgment of the differences between the political contexts.

Several decades after the Irish, Jewish people were (generally) welcomed into whiteness in the US after news of the realities of Nazi practices during WWII reached America. Three additional social contexts also helped. First, with increasing attention being paid to Jim Crow laws and segregation, the black/white binary became the most important racial issue of the day, and Jewish people fell decidedly on the white side of that binary. Secondly, Jewish people were included in the benefits provided by the FHA and moved out of the city slums and into the

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<sup>14</sup> Dyer, *White*, 53.

<sup>15</sup> "Why Do British People Make Fun of People with Red 'Ginger' Hair?," October 13, 2010, <https://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/archive/index.php/t-581756.html>.

suburbs where they could afford to buy houses and establish communities. Thirdly, and finally, the United States ideologically reconceptualized Israel as a white nation in order to garner public support for its questionable relationship with this country, and the identification of the “motherland” as white confirmed Jewish people’s white status within the United States.<sup>16</sup>

Although used less often than stories of Irishness, these historical narratives of Jewish oppression are also deployed in incomplete ways in order to legitimize current instances of gingerism as a serious problems. For example, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst questioned whether Taylor Swift’s audience would have responded positively to her infamous “I like people with red hair. I’d do a ginger,” comment if they knew about red hair prejudice’s anti-Semitic origins.<sup>17</sup>

In what follows, I will next look at the slippage of the terms “race” and “ethnicity” as they apply to European immigrant groups to the United States who have been “whitened” over time. Then, I will consider discourses of victimhood through ancestral immigration narratives—a central way in which the ginger phenomenon becomes conflated with racism. After contextualizing these historical discourses, I will turn to a discussion of racialization and consider how the ginger’s experience is both different from and similar to that of other groups. I will argue that the ginger has been “pseudoracialized.” Finally, I will conclude with critiques of critical whiteness studies and consider the implications of these critiques for my own project.

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, “Looking Jewish, Seeing Jews,” in *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, ed. Les Back and John Solomos (New York: Routledge, 2000), 249.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, “Fifty Shades of Red,” *Telegraph Review*, September 5, 2015, archived at <https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-daily-telegraph-review/20150905/281900181979696>.

### 5.1.1 Slippage of “race” and “ethnicity”

The terms race and ethnicity have had different meanings throughout the entirety of their use in American history, leading to an epistemic problem about how to define them.<sup>18</sup> The popular, commonsense understanding of these terms today is that race is biological and ethnicity is cultural.<sup>19</sup> Of course the notion of race as biological has been academically disproven, yet these concepts persist in the public consciousness. White people, especially in America, may consider themselves to have an ethnicity via their nationality, more so than a race. Being able to conflate ancestral nationality with race is a mark of power, because it relegates other races outside of the nationhood.<sup>20</sup>

Even given this problematic interpretation of race versus ethnicity, David Roediger and Matthew Frye Jacobson both argue that is historically inconsistent to see now-white European immigrant groups as subject to ethnic, rather than racial discrimination. Importantly, they do not make this claim because they wish to overstate the historical subordination of certain groups of (now) white people, but rather, they want to more accurately explore the ways in which race has actually historically functioned. Popular conceptions of ethnicity as distinct from, and as a less “severe” means of categorization than race are both anachronistic and inaccurate, which is unhelpful in historical analysis.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the over-use of the term ethnicity within

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<sup>18</sup> Jorge J.E. Gracia, “Race and Ethnicity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, ed. Naomi Zack (Oxford University Press, 2017), e-book.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 3 (1995): 300-01.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 6-7, 12; Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 18.

American society may come from the fact that white Americans are uncomfortable talking about race. Jennifer S. Simpson's work shows that white students in college classes feel that calling any attention to race is wrong and inappropriate, which perpetuates problematic color-blind ideologies.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the use of "ethnicity" in place of "race" may also be a form of what Dreama Moon refers to as "whitespeak"—how white people often use euphemisms when engaging in discussions of race.<sup>23</sup> Neither "race" nor "ethnicity" has ever been used consistently and that the criteria for who belongs to which group constantly change with political needs, as seen in the previous section on Irishness and Jewishness.<sup>24</sup>

Within popular online discourses, gingeriness is conceptualized not only as a hair color or physical type, but also as a race and/or ethnicity. For example, on the website *The Race Card Project*, a collection of "experiences, questions, hopes, dreams, laments or observations about race and identity,"<sup>25</sup> one person submitted their card with the caption, "I'm not white. I'm ginger."<sup>26</sup> Question and answer threads on Yahoo Answers, Quora, Experience Project, and Secular Café all ask, "is ginger a race?" A (rejected) petition to the UK Parliament, now hosted online, sought to classify ginger "as an ethnicity on all government documentation."<sup>27</sup> These examples reflect the transition from a purported colorblind and post-racial view of the world to one that is increasingly concerned about the security of whiteness. Within the colorblind/post-

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<sup>22</sup> Jennifer S. Simpson, "'Can't We Just Focus on the Good Stuff?': The Pedagogical Distance Between Comfort and Critique," in *Whiteness, Pedagogy, Performance: Dis/placing Race*, ed. Leda M. Cooks and Jennifer S. Simpson (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 257.

<sup>23</sup> Dreama Moon, "White Enculturation and Bourgeois Ideology: The Discursive Production of 'Good (White) Girls,'" in *Whiteness: The Social Communication of Identity*, ed. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (Newbury Park: CA, 1999), 187.

<sup>24</sup> Painter, *The History of White People*, 383.

<sup>25</sup> "About the Race Card Project," <https://theracecardproject.com/about-the-race-card-project>.

<sup>26</sup> "I'm Not White, I'm Ginger," <https://theracecardproject.com/im-not-white-im-ginger>.

<sup>27</sup> "Rejected Petition: Identify Ginger as an Ethnicity on All Government Documentation," December 1, 2015, <https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/114207>.



racial perspective, racial categories supposedly no longer have meaning. Therefore, something as seemingly trivial as a hair color can be identified as a race or an ethnicity. However, talking about gingeriness is often a coded way of talking about whiteness, as I will explain further in this chapter. Therefore, attempts to classify gingeriness as a racial or ethnic category are in some ways an attempt to secure the status of whiteness.

### **5.1.2 Invoking victimhood through European immigrant ancestry**

People have used European ethnicities, especially Irishness, in order to distance or disassociate themselves from whiteness since the rise of the Black Power movement.<sup>28</sup> Although the mistreatment and poverty of Irish immigrants to the US is popular in the American consciousness, Irishness is still one of the most “preferred” ethnicities amongst second or third generation Americans who have a “choice” in which ethnicities they claim over others.<sup>29</sup> As Diane Negra explains, Irishness offers Americans an “ideal guilt-free ethnicity.”<sup>30</sup> Increasingly, Irish Americans are both aware of the oppression of their ancestors and uncomfortable with a white identity in an age in which the workings of white supremacy are becoming more transparent. Whiteness has in some ways now become a “problematic signifier.”<sup>31</sup> Many Irish Americans look for connections to their past and in doing so, make connections to other

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 377.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Hout and Joshua R. Goldstein, “How 4.5 Million Irish Immigrants Became 40 Million Irish Americans: Demographic and Subjective Aspects of the Ethnic Composition of White Americans,” *American Sociological Review* 59, no. 1 (1994): 79

<sup>30</sup> Diane Negra, “The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture,” in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>31</sup> Third, “Does the Rug Match the Carpet?,” 223.

oppressed people, which at times may conflate their experiences.<sup>32</sup> Natasha Casey suggests that Irishness today is “solidly mainstream” and because of this, ideologically, Irishness could now be considered a form of “pure” whiteness, in the sense that whiteness is the norm. Irishness has thus also become associated, through certain imagery, with white supremacy. For example, Celtic flags and tattoos are popular symbols within white power groups.<sup>33</sup> Of course, this is ironic, given the links to Catholicism and white supremacy’s historical disavowal of that religion.

Today Ireland has its own growing white nationalist movement, in line with those of much of the Western world.<sup>34</sup> Although the Irish’s relatively recent whiteness may make this development seem unlikely, it is less surprising when one considers that most Americans’ own understandings of Irishness and Irish history are contradictory, often ill-informed, and conflated with the histories of other immigrant and minority groups.<sup>35</sup> Less explicitly, performances of Irish American pride can sometimes veer into white pride sentiments. As Maryellen explained when she described an often overlooked side of St. Patrick’s Day festivities in her interview, “It’s not okay to claim that you’re oppressed, it’s not okay to be racist [to other groups], it’s not okay to do all these things...It’s just a connection to a lot of ideas and not understanding

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<sup>32</sup> Catherine M. Eagan, “Still ‘Black’ and ‘Proud’: Irish America and the Racial Politics of Hibernophilia,” in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 23-5.

<sup>33</sup> Natasha Casey, “‘The Best Kept Secret in Retail’: Selling Irishness in Contemporary America,” in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 98-100.

<sup>34</sup> For commentary on this movement, see Ian Begley, “White Supremacy Groups in Ireland: A Growing Concern,” *The Circular*, April 21, 2013, <http://thecircular.org/white-supremacy-groups-in-ireland-a-growing-concern>; Ronit Lentin, “Increasing Extreme Right Wing Threat for Ireland,” *Free Radikal*, May 20, 2016, <http://www.ronitlentin.net/2016/05/20/increasing-extreme-right-wing-threat-for-ireland/#more-1197>.

<sup>35</sup> Casey, “The Best Kept Secret in Retail,” 94.

yourself in context, thinking that you're a victim, [or] still somehow of that immigrant-working class, when you're not, at all."<sup>36</sup> Such discourses, taken out of historical, social, and geographical context, can be dangerous. These discourses are also related to popularly circulating myths of "white slavery" or "Irish slavery," used to compare Irish indentured servitude to African chattel slavery. John Donoghue describes these myth as the result of right-wing and white supremacists misinterpretations of a nationalist history that "often rob[s] the past of its complexity."<sup>37</sup> Michael Malouf critiques the title of Kate McCafferty's popular novel, *Testimony of an Irish Slave Girl*, in a similar way, suggesting that McCafferty "conflates two different modes of ownership, while also obscuring the role of racial classification by skin color (as opposed to religion and nationality) that was crucial to the ideological construction of slavery during the early modern period."<sup>38</sup>

Family stories and media narratives detailing unpleasant and hostile experiences for European immigrants, such as those Maryellen alluded to, are popular in the United States. These discourses at times lead to the denying of white privilege—what Charles A. Gallagher describes as playing the "white ethnic card."<sup>39</sup> Playing the "white ethnic card" is a response to the perceived loss of status of white identity. At the same time, the fact that narratives of Irish hardship are used problematically today to absolve white guilt and to disassociate from white

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<sup>36</sup> Donica O'Malley, oral history interview with Maryellen Kilcullen, March 22, 2015, via Skype. Catie Byrne makes a similar observation in "Deconstructing Irish Pride," *The Carolinian*, March 22, 2017, <https://carolinianuncg.com/2017/03/22/deconstructing-irish-pride>.

<sup>37</sup> John Donoghue, "The Curse of Cromwell: Revisiting the Irish Slavery Debate," *History Ireland* 25, no. 1 (2017): 24.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Malouf, "Feeling Éire(y): On Irish-Caribbean Popular Culture," in *The Irish In Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 340.

<sup>39</sup> Charles A. Gallagher, "Playing the White Ethnic Card: Using Ethnic Identity to Deny Contemporary Racism," in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, ed. Ashley W. Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (New York, Routledge: 2003), 145.

privilege does not refute the fact that poor Irish immigrants to the US and Irish people under British colonialist rule were racialized as inferior to Anglo people, through several avenues. Amanda Third warns that these critiques can erase the potential subversiveness of Irish Otherness.<sup>40</sup> It is possible for it to be simultaneously true that Irish immigrants did experience oppression and that their ancestors may use these narratives in dangerous ways today. Still, the utility of this subversiveness for educating the public about the constructed nature of whiteness remains seems generally limited and in the current moment, potentially non-existent.

### 5.1.3 Racialization and pseudoracialization

Race, as previously discussed, is not an innate characteristic, but is a set of historical and social relations.<sup>41</sup> Race is created by what Steve Martinot describes as the process of racialization, or “the way race is produced and bestowed on people by institutional social actions, and not simply as a condition found in people as their racial category.”<sup>42</sup> People are socially categorized by a shorthand of “colors” which are arbitrarily divided and hierarchized.<sup>43</sup> Race can also be produced by what K. Anthony Appiah refers to as ascription. Ascription is the process of applying racial labels to both others and ourselves.<sup>44</sup> The criteria for ascribing particular labels change during different historical and cultural moments; for example, “subcontinent” of origin is one such

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<sup>40</sup> Third, “Does the Rug Match the Carpet?” 223-4.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Gilroy, *“There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack”: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), 5.

<sup>42</sup> Steve Martinot, *The Rule of Racialization: Class, Identity, Governance* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2003), 13.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>44</sup> K. Anthony Appiah, “Racial Identity and Racial Identification,” *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, ed. Les Back and John Solomos (New York: Routledge, 2000): 609.

criteria now, but does not always work to define and delimit people.<sup>45</sup> Paul Gilroy's idea of race formation is third idea, similar to both racialization and ascription. Race formation describes the similar process of transforming phenotypical variation into "concrete systems of differentiation," though appeals to biology.<sup>46</sup> Much of race's sustained power as a social organizational tool is dependent upon its historical legitimization by scientific institutions, as discussed in Chapter Four.

The process of making the ginger Other has some things in common with the racialization of other groups. However, there are also some differences. Therefore, I will use the term "pseudoracialization" to describe what has happened to gingers. The term pseudoracialized is not my invention, and has been used previously to describe other groups that blur the boundary between white and non-white, such as Irish, Jewish, and increasingly, Latino and Hispanic peoples.<sup>47</sup> From my perspective, gingers are an ideologically white group, but as I will show later in this chapter's analysis, they are at times either positioned or interpreted as non-white within media texts and the public. By using the term pseudoracialized, I mean to acknowledge that gingers have been subjected to the first part of Paul Gilroy's conception of "race formation," wherein phenotypical variations are transformed into "concrete systems of differentiation based on 'race' and colour" through appeals to "spurious biological theory."<sup>48</sup> As described in the previous chapters, this has happened with the ginger through online discourses. Physical features

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 607-8.

<sup>46</sup> Gilroy, "There Ain't No Black," 38.

<sup>47</sup> Dale T. Knobel, "Celtic Exodus': The Famine Irish, Ethnic Stereotypes, and the Cultivation of American Racial Nationalism," in *Fleeing the Famine: North America and Irish Refugees, 1845-1851*, ed. Margaret M. Mulrooney (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003): 89; Robert Michael, *A Concise History of American Antisemitism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005): vii; Michael Lind, "Prescriptions for a New National Democracy," *Political Science Quarterly* 110, no. 4 (1995): 566.

<sup>48</sup> Gilroy, "There Ain't No Black," 38.

are typified, exaggerated, and placed on a spectrum. These features are then biologized and linked to a genetic mutation which labels them as diseased. At the same time, I recognize that though it could be argued gingers are placed into a hierarchy underneath normative whiteness, this placement is limited in its effects, and not one that would have structural or material consequences, in most cases. As Gilroy suggests, the second step to racialization is the organization of races into politics.<sup>49</sup> A major consequence of this organization for people of color is exclusion from both ideological and legal categories like nationhood and citizenship. Because gingers are still hailed as white and given the structural and institutional benefit of whiteness, the second half of the process of racial formation does not apply to them.

#### **5.1.4 Critiques of critical whiteness studies**

Though there are important reasons to study it, focusing on whiteness can also backfire. Dyer has several fears for the future of critical whiteness studies, including white academics feeling like they no longer need to engage in analyses of other races, the cultivation of a kind of “me-too-ism,” wherein white people recognize the negative qualities of whiteness and think, “what’s so good about being white?”, white men using such critiques as a way of claiming oppression via affirmative action policies, and a general disengagement from critical race work due to feelings of guilt.<sup>50</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson similarly warns that white people may “disassociate from whiteness,” upon better understanding that it is constructed and that perhaps their ancestors were

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Dyer, *White*, 11.

not always considered white.<sup>51</sup> All of these are negative potential consequences of studying a topic such as this one. At the same time, there are ways to mitigate these effects.

To effectively interrogate whiteness, John Solomos and Les Back suggest scholars must do two things: undermine the idea of “normal” and avoid the “reification of whiteness as social identity.”<sup>52</sup> By grounding my project in “specific empirical and historical contexts,” contextualizing whiteness in terms of its relationship to white supremacy, and paying attention to how “gendered processes are inextricably articulated within race,” I have followed their directives to best critique whiteness without recentering it as a natural, superior identity.

## 5.2 FOUR INTERPRETATIONS OF THE GINGER

The figure of the ginger and the ginger phenomenon as a whole, are typically interpreted and/or positioned in one of four ways: as a stand-in for whiteness, as a stand-in for any social difference, as excessively white, and as Other. These four categories overlap and several of the examples I analyze could fit into more than one of them. In what follows, I will introduce each interpretation, and provide examples to further explain it. First, I will show how the ginger can be a stand in for all white people, or for the concept of whiteness, generally, through claims of “reverse racism” in the ginger sperm ban of 2011 and through the use of the term “the last acceptable prejudice.” Next, I will describe how the ginger sometimes acts as a stand-in for *any* social difference, in a case of whitewashing a black women’s hair product through the use of

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<sup>51</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 12.

<sup>52</sup> John Solomos and Les Back, “Introduction: Theorising Race and Racism,” in *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, ed. Les Back and John Solomos (New York: Routledge, 2000), 22.

redheaded spokespeople. However, I will follow that with a critique of scholarly work that argues the ginger is an “arbitrary” figure. Then, I will show how the ginger is often positioned as excessively white, and contrasted with both blackness and normative whiteness. I will analyze a new example about Conan O’Brien, and look at media representations of biracial twins, one of whom is labeled “black” and the other of whom is labeled “ginger.” Finally, I will consider times when the ginger is viewed as Other, even non-white. Here, I first look at a historical interpretation of redheaded Irish women as Others, through Amanda Third’s postcolonial reading. Then, I will conclude by analyzing the movement to grant gingers a legally protected class status.

### **5.2.1 Gingers as a stand-in for whiteness**

When the MC1R DNA test was released, part of the public backlash to it was fear that it could be used for eugenic purposes. One set of responses to this idea claimed that the test would be used to limit the number of ginger babies, who in this context, were interpreted by readers as standing in for as white babies. In some comments, fears about eugenic potential led to fears about “reverse racism,” manifested through the abortion of redheaded fetuses. For example, one reader of an article about the test commented, “‘Ginger’, the only form of racism that’s still accepted and even encouraged. But ‘gingers’ are white, so that’s okay then.” In what follows, I will look more closely this discursive pattern, in which gingers stand in for white people. Since I have already analyzed the MC1R DNA tests at length in Chapter Four, I will turn to a different, but related case study here: the ginger sperm ban. Next, I will analyze another discursive pattern represented in the above comment, wherein the ginger also becomes a stand in for whiteness.



The phrase, “the last acceptable prejudice” is often used to describe the ginger phenomenon, but like gingerism itself, is a coded way of talking about fears of prejudice against white people.

#### 5.2.1.1 The ginger sperm ban and “reverse racism”

There are many examples in which gingers are interpreted as standing in for white people as a whole. These examples at times lead to claims of “reverse racism.” “Reverse racism,” or the idea that “the Civil Rights movement not only ended the subordination of communities of color in all aspects of social life but also simultaneously led to a similar subordination of whites,” is a myth.<sup>53</sup> “Reverse racism” is a fantasy made possible by post-racial rhetoric. However, it is a fantasy with a great deal of social power. It works by acting as a “‘dog-whistle’ term to interpolate white listeners’ frustrations at an imagined decline in social status;” not coincidentally, its popularity has increased during the recent economic downturn.<sup>54</sup> White people tend to imagine any social gain by marginalized groups as part of a “zero-sum” game, in which they lose whatever (small) privileges other groups may finally claim.<sup>55</sup> The idea of reverse racism is impossible because it disregards white supremacy and ignores the racial hierarchy. To believe in reverse racism, one must understand racism through a simplified definition, along the lines of “being mean to someone because of the color of their skin.” Again, I am not *endorsing* claims that gingerism constitutes reverse racism, nor suggesting that such a thing a reverse

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<sup>53</sup> Aaron Roussell, Kathryn Henne, Karen S. Glover, and Dale Willits, “Impossibility of a ‘Reverse Racism’ Effect,” *Criminology & Public Policy* 00, no. 0, special essay rejoinder, (2017): 2.

<sup>54</sup> Tad Suiter, “Reverse Racism: A Discursive History,” in *Race Still Matters: The Reality of African American Lives and the Myth of Postracial Society*, ed. Yuya Kiuchi (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016), 6, 21.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

racism could ever exist. However, these claims do exist within the online discourse, and I will analyze them here.

In 2011, an international sperm bank announced that they would stop taking donations from redheaded men, due to a lack of demand. In response to public outcry, Cryos International's CEO, Ole Schu, rationalized the decision, explaining, "I do not think you choose a redhead unless the sterile male has red hair or because the lone woman has a preference for redheads. And that's perhaps not so many, especially in the latter case."<sup>56</sup> Unsurprisingly, this explanation did not sit well with those who were upset about the decision. The story went viral, thanks to a series of facetious online headlines, such as, "I'm a Redhead and My Sperm is Just as Good as Yours," "Sperm Bank to Redheads: We Don't Want Your Semen," and "Nobody Wants Ginger Children."<sup>57</sup> The sperm ban is a material manifestation of the ginger phenomenon, one that make it difficult to consider the phenomenon as merely a satirical joke. Dan recognized the ban as a form of discrimination that could have a potential monetary effect on him:

Did you know I can't donate to a sperm bank? I can't donate to a sperm bank. They don't take redheaded sperm anymore because nobody wants it. Dude, if I was homeless and on the street and needed money, I'd have to go and can [beg for money with a can to collect it]. I couldn't go "do my thing" and take a check for it. That's kind of fucked up, in a way...you don't understand, we almost get treated like a sub-culture, like almost racism.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Chloe Cross, "Is Cryos Trying to Cull Ginger People?," *Vice*, February 25, 2013, <https://www.vice.com/da/article/xdpn83/is-cryos-trying-to-cull-ginger-people>.

<sup>57</sup> Christian Lander, "I'm a Redhead and My Sperm is Just as Good as Yours," *CNN*, September 21, 2011, <https://www.cnn.com/2011/09/21/opinion/lander-red-hair-sperm/index.html>; David W. Freeman, "Sperm Bank to Redheads: We Don't Want Your Semen," *CBS News*, September 19, 2011, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/sperm-bank-to-redheads-we-dont-want-your-semen/>; Rebecca Greenfield, "Nobody Wants Ginger Children," *The Atlantic*, September 16, 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Donica O'Malley, oral history interview with Dan Wallace, Winthrop, MA, July 9, 2016.

Online response to the ban was not so concerned with economic discrepancies, but rather was more concerned with the ban's potential to limit the number of new ginger (here read as white) babies born. In these ways, the ban was interpreted as a consequence of "reverse racism."

In response to an article about the ban on *Gizmodo*, one commenter explains that people do not want to have redheaded children, because of the "inconvenience" (i.e., it is difficult to take them out in the sun) and because there is only a fifty percent chance that the child would be turn out to be female." Thus, this commenter implied that no one wants a redheaded son, contributing to the anti-male ginger discourses analyzed in Chapter Three. A response suggests that, "maybe they can abort the male fetuses and have female?" Follow up comments to this suggestion read, "wasn't Hitler doing this same thing [just] in a more aggressive way?," "Begun, the eugenics war has," and "that's racist!" Here, the comments do not specifically invoke the idea of gingerism, rather they invoke "racism," in general, even though they are talking about a white group. Similarly, during a conversation about reverse racism on the web forum, *College Confidential*, one person confesses that they have recently observed a lot of "reverse racism" towards white people, and that it is particularly directed towards redheads. Another commenter adds the redhead sperm ban as an example and writes, "Honestly I really don't get the reason why they are not allowed to donate. I hate discrimination...." The concept of gingerism, typically invoked during conversations about sensational events like these, is replaced in favor of discussions of racism, reverse racism, and eugenics. In these conversations, eugenics is perceived as a threat to white people's dominance, which as described earlier, is when the rhetoric of "reverse racism" becomes most prevalent. When gingers stand in for white people, such claims are interpreted in this way.

### 5.2.1.2 “The last acceptable prejudice”

In an article from the British site *Unilad*, Jamie Roberts muses, “Why is Ginger Bullying one of the Last ‘Acceptable Prejudices?’”<sup>59</sup> Roberts goes on to ask, “if the Royal family aren’t safe from this prejudice then what hope is there for the rest of the ginger population?”<sup>60</sup> Roberts’ article is just one of many that use the rhetoric “last acceptable prejudice” in online discourse to describe ginger discrimination. Similar headlines read, “Is Ginger the Last Acceptable Prejudice,” “The Last Acceptable Prejudice? Sadly, Pale, Stale Males Aren’t the Only Victims,” “I Too Have Ginger Hair. Abusing Us is Not Acceptable Prejudice,” and “Why is it Still Okay to Mock Ginger Kids?,” amongst many other examples.<sup>61</sup> The term “the last acceptable prejudice” is itself interesting and reflects current understandings of social power. Some examples of prejudices that have been described in this way include: homophobia, anti-Catholicism, fat and obesity bias, and discrimination against poor white people, pejoratively termed “white trash.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Jamie Roberts, “Why is Ginger Bullying one of the Last ‘Acceptable Prejudices?’” *Unilad*, n.d., <https://www.unilad.co.uk/featured/why-is-ginger-bullying-one-of-the-last-acceptable-prejudices>.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Sarah Dean, “Is Ginger The Last Acceptable Prejudice?” *Huffington Post UK*, June 4, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2011/04/06/is-ginger-the-last-acceptable-prejudice\\_n\\_7410520.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2011/04/06/is-ginger-the-last-acceptable-prejudice_n_7410520.html); Marina Hyde, “The Last Acceptable Prejudice? Sadly, Pale, Stale Males Aren’t the Only Victims,” *The Guardian*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/16/last-acceptable-prejudice-pale-stale-males>; Nicholas Milton, “I Too Have Ginger Hair. Abusing Us is Not Acceptable Prejudice,” *Guardian*, May 10, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/10/ginger-hair-edward-watson-gingerism>; Hortense Smith, “Why Is It Still Okay To Mock Ginger Kids?” *Jezebel*, January 24, 2009, <https://jezebel.com/5138519/why-is-it-still-okay-to-mock-ginger-kids>.

<sup>62</sup> James V. Carmichael and Marilyn L. Shontz, “The Last Socially Acceptable Prejudice: Gay and Lesbian Issues, Social Responsibilities, and Coverage of These Topics in M.L.I.S./M.L.S. Programs,” *The Library Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (1996): 21-58; Philip Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Sahale A. Flanagan, “Obesity: The Last Bastion of Prejudice,” *Obesity Surgery* 6, no. 5 (1996): 430-7; Lonie McMichael, *Acceptable Prejudice? Fat, Rhetoric, and Social Justice* (Nashville:

Clearly, given their prevalence, all of these prejudices are acceptable to some extent, or people would not partake in them. However, participating in such prejudices is also looked down upon enough to be given the label of “the last acceptable prejudice.” While the opposite of the “last acceptable prejudice” is presumably supposed to be “unacceptable prejudice,” it could also be the “first” acceptable, and thus socially sanctioned, prejudice. Racism, sexism, and classism are never termed “last acceptable” prejudices, unless they intersect with whiteness. Therefore, like the ginger phenomenon itself, the idea of acceptable and unacceptable prejudices is closely tied to whiteness.

During my interviews, several narrators noted that children are seemingly allowed to make fun of other children with red hair, without consequences from adults. Donna is an artist and a youth worker who, inspired by her own experiences with red-haired teasing as a child in Australia and an adult in Scotland, founded an anti-bullying campaign called Ingingerness, a play on the Highland city, Inverness. Her son also has red hair and Donna wants to make sure that he grows up with a positive self-image. The organization was inspired by, but is not limited to combating anti-ginger prejudice. Rather, Donna wants to cultivate self-esteem in all children. She described ginger bullying as:

an acceptable slag, it's an acceptable teasing genre, teasing theme, or whatever. And I feel like it's like the last sort of thing you're allowed to just, that it's perfectly normal to be teased about, whereas you wouldn't tease anybody about an attribute their born with, so it wouldn't be acceptable to tease someone about their skin color, it wouldn't be acceptable to tease someone if they only had one leg, whatever they're born with, but it is still acceptable here to tease people about being ginger.<sup>63</sup>

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Pearlson Press, 2013); Gael Sweeney, “The King of White Trash Culture: Elvis Presley and the Aesthetics of Excess” in *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, ed. Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray (New York: Routledge, 1997), 251; Jim Goad, *The Redneck Manifesto: How Hillbillies, Hicks, and White Trash Became America's Scapegoats* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

<sup>63</sup> Donica O'Malley, oral history interview with Donna Strachan, Dalkeith, Scotland, August 16, 2015.

Though she used the rhetoric of “last acceptable” prejudice herself, Donna was also careful to explain that she did not conflate teasing and bullying with systematic oppression. She did not like media representations of gingerism as a racial issue, nor did she see it as comparable to racism: “it does feel uncomfortable to say it’s a ‘race issue’ because you still have the privilege of being white,” she commented. At the same time, she was horrified when she was interviewed on a national radio program and while live on air, the host told her, “me and my wife are pregnant, and we seriously said ‘will we still love it if it’s ginger?’” On the one hand Donna understands that ginger prejudice is not racism and was keenly aware of issues of whiteness and privilege. On the other hand, she believes statements like those the host made should not be socially acceptable. This double blind lead her to label gingerist remarks with the qualifier, “last acceptable.”

Despite her nuanced interpretation of the ginger phenomenon, after doing media interviews about Ingingerness, Donna found that her story had been misrepresented in the press. *Spiked*, an online current affairs publication, self-described as a “metaphorical missile against misanthropy,” published an article titled, “Gingers, Nerds, and Fat People—The ‘New Prejudice?’”<sup>64</sup> Columnist Patrick West described how the newly defined prejudices these three groups face are sometimes compared to racism, through “last acceptable” prejudice and “new prejudice” discourses. He criticized this comparison and used Donna’s work as an example to analyze, despite the fact that her organization is not actually centered on ginger-empowerment, but rather anti-bullying, generally, and she does not argue that gingerism is akin to racism.

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<sup>64</sup> Patrick West, “Gingers, Nerds and Fat People –The ‘New Prejudice?’” *Spiked*, September 16, 2014, [http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/gingers-nerds-and-fat-people-the-new-prejudice/#.Wph4\\_xPwbq0](http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/gingers-nerds-and-fat-people-the-new-prejudice/#.Wph4_xPwbq0).

Donna attempted to re-explain her position to the columnist via a comment on the article, but received no response.

When I asked her why she thought that Wilson wrote the story in this way, she replied,

Because it sells papers. It's economic. It sells papers. It's a hot topic. It's sensational. Newspapers need to have a hook for their articles—that's a hook. People are interested. People will read it and they might buy the paper. I really think it's that simple. 'Cause newspapers are businesses and they want to sell papers, you know? I really think it's just that black and white with that one...If you put "gingerism" in there, you get a lot of exposure, all of a sudden. So I think the newspapers love hyping that stuff up.<sup>65</sup>

*Spiked* is actually an online-only press, but Donna's suspicion of the economic imperative of publishing on a sensationalist topic still makes sense, given that online publications often depend on "clicks" for advertising revenue. In this case, the author of the article, shared my belief that "last acceptable" prejudices are often ways for privileged (especially white) people to talk about feeling attacked. In this sense, within a society that considers itself post-racial, ginger people can stand in for all white people. At the same time, there are occasions in which ginger prejudice does seem to be socially sanctioned, such as in Donna's interview. In this particular case, Donna invoked the rhetoric of "last acceptable slag" as a way to make sense of these contradictions. Unfortunately for Donna, however, her comments were taken out of context and used to make an argument that portrayed her work in a negative light.

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<sup>65</sup> Donica O'Malley, oral history interview with Donna Strachan, Dalkeith, Scotland, August 16, 2015.

## 5.2.2 Gingers as a stand-in for any social difference

In Chapter Two while detailing the rise of the ginger phenomenon in Australia, I described an episode from the comedy series, *Summer Heights High*. In this episode, the often disruptive student, Jonah Takalua (a Polynesian character played by white actor Chris Liley in what many people considered brown face) and his friends pick on Ben, a small, white, redheaded boy. When their teacher scolds them for bullying, Jonah's response is, "well, people are racist to us, so we can be racist to rangas."<sup>66</sup> The substitution or comparison of one "race" for another (insofar as gingers are positioned as a race here), one physical characteristic for another, or one social group for another, happens often in online discourse about prejudice. This is especially prevalent with the ginger phenomenon, because hair color is not really recognized as a historical or political "social difference," and so it is hard to legitimize its prejudice. However, comparing, conflating, or substituting markers of difference can "obscure significant differences between the types of suffering experienced by these different social groups," and reinforce dominant ideologies.<sup>67</sup> Some groups of people, such as gingers, may experience discrimination, but experiencing discrimination does not necessarily lead to oppression.<sup>68</sup>

Because gingers are pseudoracialized, the conflation of social categories and their different kinds of discrimination and oppression happens often with racial differences, as described above. However, this conflation seems to happen online more often than in interpersonal interactions. The majority of my narrators were in fact careful to distinguish

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<sup>66</sup> *Summer Heights High*. "Episode 1." Directed by Stuart McDonald. Written by Chris Liley. Australian Broadcasting Company, September 5, 2007.

<sup>67</sup> Barbara Applebaum, "Social Justice, Democratic Education the Silencing of Words that Wound," *Journal of Moral Education* 32, no. 2 (2003): 158.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*



explicitly between racism and gingerism. For example, Luke stated that, “Obviously I think racism is more of an issue because, you know, the history of abuse there, and also more evidence that policemen or an academic institutions, are institutionally racist. That seems to be a bigger problem.”<sup>69</sup> Still, he suggested,

It’s not fair for someone to be mean to you because of your genetics. There are some similarities. I don’t think it’s as severe a problem. But it is still not nice to be mean to someone for something they can’t control. There are some similarities...It’s not nice. I don’t really understand actually, why people were mean, are mean, to gingers. It’s just a hair color. But then again, being mean to anyone is not really very nice. Being racist isn’t very nice. People can’t control their race or their hair color, or how tall they are or how short they are.<sup>70</sup>

The perception of hair color being something one “cannot control” came up frequently in my interviews, including in Donna’s comments in the last section. If something is perceived as “uncontrollable” then there may be more social sympathy for it. For example, consider the rhetoric of “born this way” in recent popular music that frames sexuality as an innate characteristic.<sup>71</sup> Such framing is at times credited with leading to wider social support for non-straight identities. However, this social support is contingent on the fact that this characteristic is out of an individual’s control, so it risks essentializing sexuality.<sup>72</sup>

While Luke’s answer distinguished between racism and gingerism, he did recognize some similarity between the two. However, others directly compared the two issues. While I was in attendance at the 2015 Irish Redhead Convention, I attended a “town hall” style open

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<sup>69</sup> Donica O’Malley, oral history interview with Luke Garratt, Oxford, UK, August 7, 2015.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> For example, see Mackelmore’s “Same Love,” in which he states, “Republicans think it’s a decision,” and that it is a “pre-disposition,” and Lady Gaga’s “Born this Way,” in which she sings, “A different lover is not a sin,” “I was born this way,” and “No matter gay, straight, or bi, Lesbian, transgendered life, I’m on the right track baby, I was born to survive.”

<sup>72</sup> Jeff Bennett, ““Born This Way”: Queer Vernacular and the Politics of Origins,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 11, no. 3 (2014): 215.

discussion, led by the creator of a red hair-themed web series, *Redheads Anonymous*. During this talk, there was frequent substitution of identity categories. For example, one person described redhead prejudice as, “almost racism,” and another said, “replace the word ginger with black and see how comfortable you are saying it.”<sup>73</sup> A third seemed to have an epiphany: “People with red hair get identified as ‘red.’ When would you go out on the street and yell, ‘hey, white! Or hey, black!’ You know, people don’t do that. It is always just redheads and I guess I didn’t realize it until sitting here.”<sup>74</sup> Additionally, two people from locations outside the US compared being hailed as “ginger” in the street, to being called a racial slur. However, neither of these people were native speakers of English, so it is difficult to comment upon the use of these slurs, translated into English, versus in their primary languages, nor the racial contexts of their (Western European) countries of origin. Nevertheless, these connotations are troubling.

In addition to race, the ginger phenomenon has also stood in for other social differences, including homosexuality, class status, and others. For example, signage from ginger pride events has used slogans like, “We’re Here, We’re Clear!” and “We Are the 2%!” In this section, I will first consider a case in which hair color is conflated with racialized hair textures, when a hair product historically advertised to and used by black women embarks upon a controversial rebranding campaign involving redheads. Then I will address scholarship that analyzes the ginger as an uncomplicated, arbitrary signifier, who can stand in for a range of types of oppression. Though the ginger is polysemous, as I will show, he or she is not exactly arbitrary, nor is his or her use as a metaphoric oppressed group “uncomplicated.”

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<sup>73</sup> Anonymous, *Redheads Anonymous Talk*, part of the Irish Redhead Convention, August 22, 2015, Crosshaven Ireland.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

### 5.2.2.1 How to Be a Redhead and the Shea Moisture controversy

In April 2017, Shea Moisture, a hair and skincare product company for black women, released a new campaign. The video opens with a young, light-skinned black woman with curly black hair talking about how she grew up hating her hair and how kids used to throw things in it. Text on the screen flashes: “Fact: Hair Hate is Real.” Next, a blonde white woman says, “It was lots of days staring in the mirror, like, I don’t know what to do with it.” Then, a redheaded white woman appears, saying, “I just didn’t feel like I was supposed to be a redhead. I dyed my hair blonde for seven years of my life. Platinum blonde.” Later, this woman is joined by her white redheaded sister who states, with regards to Shea Moisture, “It just gives us all the results that we need. It’s kind of that go-to product.” The video ends with the first black curly-haired woman explaining that she now loves “everything” about her hair, and then cuts to each woman in the video saying “everybody gets love.”<sup>75</sup>

Response to the ad was immediate and critical and circulated through blogs and Twitter. People noted the exclusion of black women with tightly curled and textured hair from the ad, as well as the seemingly bizarre inclusion of white women. As many customers pointed out, Shea Moisture’s success up until that point was largely due to black women’s purchasing of their products. As a group that is often ignored by or excluded from mainstream beauty products, many black women appreciated that Shea Moisture made products specifically for them.

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<sup>75</sup> The original video has since been removed from Shea Moisture’s social media accounts, but was archived by *The YBF* (Young Black and Fabulous) website: “SORRY 2017: Shea Moisture Responds To Continued BACKLASH Over Gentrified-Style Commercial, ‘We F\*\*\*\*D Up’,” *The YBF*, April 25, 2017, <http://theybf.com/2017/04/25/sorry-2017-shea-moisture-responds-to-backlash-they-received-over-controversial-commercial>. The ad was originally produced by Vayner Media (<https://vaynermedia.com>), described as a “full-service digital agency built for the now.”

Interestingly, some of the criticism centered not around just whitewashing the Shea Moisture brand, but specifically around the inclusion of redheaded women in the ad. For example, Sam Reed, writing for the *Hollywood Reporter* stated, “Many of Shea’s loyal customers, however, are unhappy with the brand’s comparison of embracing red hair to embracing natural black texture....The consequences for African American women who choose to embrace their natural texture have, historically, been more severe than white women who choose to ‘embrace’ their red hair.”<sup>76</sup> Likewise, *The YBF* stated that, “While the spot opened with a black woman (who appears to be biracial), it primarily focused on two white women who complained about hating their red hair, or whatever.”<sup>77</sup> The video however, does not actually focus on the redheaded women. Out of the sixty second video, approximately seven seconds feature the white blonde woman, nine seconds feature the white redheaded sisters, and twenty-five seconds feature the black woman. The rest of the time is devoted to text or product shots. Certainly, as Reed points out, the plight of the redheaded woman does not compare to that of the natural haired black woman. Research shows that black women face discrimination over hair in school, work, and other areas of social life, with serious material consequences.<sup>78</sup> White

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<sup>76</sup> Sam Reed, “Shea Moisture is the Latest Company Facing Backlash for an Ad,” *Hollywood Reporter*, April 24, 2017, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/shea-moisture-company-faces-backlash-ad-996902>.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Margo Okazawa-Rey, Tracy Robinson, Janie Ward, “Black Women and the Politics of Skin Color and Hair,” *Women & Therapy* 6, no. 1-2 (1987): 89-102; D. Wendy Greene, “Black Women Can’t Have Blonde Hair...in the Workplace,” *The Journal of Gender, Race and Justice* 14, no. 2 (1997): 405-430; Tracey Owens Patton, “Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair,” *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 2 (2006): 24-51; Victoria Althea Price, *The Politics of Black Women’s Hair* (London, ON: Insomniac Press, 2009), e-book version; Cynthia L. Robinson, “Hair as Race: Why “Good Hair” May Be Bad for Black Females,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 22, no. 4 (2011): 358-376; Tabora A. Johnson, Teiahsha Bankhead, “Hair It Is: Examining the Experiences of Black Women with Natural Hair,” *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 2, no. 2 (2014): 86-100.

redheaded women do not deal with such discrimination. Additionally, the inclusion of blonde and red hair as parallel to curly hair in this ad conflates hair color with hair texture. However, since redheaded women may have had to deal with bullying about their hair as children, their inclusion fits within the (admittedly obtuse and problematic) narrative of the commercial—especially when compared to blondeness, which is typically viewed as a standard of European beauty. It is unclear then what the company’s intent was in including a blonde-haired person in the ad, since the problem the blonde actress alludes to is not knowing what to do with her hair, rather than being uncomfortable with it. Therefore, it is somewhat strange that redheadedness, rather than blondeness, or even whiteness generally, was targeted in critical response to the Shea Moisture rebranding attempt. Blonde hair is often seen as ideal whiteness, but here redheadedness is the version of whiteness that is critiqued. Response to the ad is yet another way in which the ginger acts as a scapegoat for concerns about whiteness.

The two redheaded women featured in the ad, Stephanie and Adrienne Vendetti, are part of a growing segment of the online ginger pride movement that has capitalized on this community’s self-perceived exclusion from dominant white culture. In 2011, the Vendetti sisters founded a company called “How to Be a Redhead.”<sup>79</sup> The company’s goal is: “empowering every redhead to feel confident, to look amazing and to rock their beauty” and its tagline is “Red hair is more than a color, it’s a lifestyle!” Their main products are a beauty book and a monthly subscription box of curated hair and skin care products targeted towards red haired women. They also run a blog that features stories about people with red hair, as well as beauty tips. I subscribed to the How to Be a Redhead box for three months in 2016. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the limited demographic, there are not many products designed specifically for people with

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<sup>79</sup> “About,” *How to Be a Redhead*, 2018, “<https://howtobeadhead.com/about/>.”

natural red hair. The ones that are redhead-specific are things like reddish-toned bobby pins and elastics that “blend in” better than the traditionally dark ones. Most of the red hair-specific products sent in the boxes I received were actually for people with dyed red hair, designed to prevent the coloring from fading. Aside from those products, overwhelmingly, the rest of the boxes’ contents were geared towards people with very light skin, more so than towards people with red hair; for instance, I received numerous samples of sunscreen during this period.

The exclusion of women of color and very pale white women from mainstream beauty products are different issues, which should not be conflated. In fact, comparing complaints about makeup not being light enough to it not being dark enough is another common way that the ginger phenomenon swaps out a concern of people of color for one experienced by (very) white people. Though the ideal skin tone advertised today is somewhere in between these two groups, it is still one that is considered white. Likewise, very pale white women, including gingers, are still ideologically hailed as white. As Richard Dyer explains, “variability of hue within a nonetheless socially guaranteed whiteness is as much a characteristic of the discourse of white skin colour as attempts to make it literally white.”<sup>80</sup> The whiteness of very pale people is “socially guaranteed.” The fact that whiteness accommodates variability in shades of skin color speaks to its power to determine who is included and excluded. As Nell Irvin Painter explains, rather than being negated or dismantled, the boundaries of whiteness have continued to expand over time, incorporating new groups under different rules.<sup>81</sup> Dyer’s comment also explains why white people can tan and use makeup like bronzer to make their skin darker, without losing any of their whiteness and accompanying social benefits. In this example, redheaded people were

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<sup>80</sup> Dyer, *White*, 50.

<sup>81</sup> Painter, *The History of White People*, 383.

included in the commercial to show that the product could be for “anybody”—in this way, the ginger here stands in for “any” social difference.

#### 5.2.2.2 The ginger as arbitrary in scholarly work

Although the ginger phenomenon has not previously been the subject of an in-depth scholarly analysis, some scholars have used mediated examples of ginger stereotypes as evidence for different arguments. The most popular example of so-called gingerism that that has received attention is singer M.I.A.’s music video, *Born Free*, which was released on YouTube in 2010. The video, which features a group of young, white, red-haired men being rounded up by racially ambiguous military-like figures, transported to the desert, then shot at, chased, and blown up by mines, was swiftly banned from YouTube for its graphic violent content.<sup>82</sup> Immediately following the video’s release and subsequent banning, it was interpreted in multiple ways within online popular news journalism and blogs. Various writers suggested that the video was released for shock value, that it represented Sri Lanka’s civil war (M.I.A.’s country of origin), that it was commentary on Arizona’s immigration policy debates, that it symbolized the Northern Ireland conflicts, or that it was an allegory for global concerns about genocide, racism, and discrimination, more generally.

In addition to the conversations that the video started in the blogosphere, more recently, it has also become the subject of academic inquiry. Brian Creech suggests that, “gingers can act as an uncomplicated signifier for other races in narratives that deal with racial discrimination and

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<sup>82</sup> Monica Herrera, “M.I.A.’s ‘Born Free’ Video Banned from YouTube for Graphic Violence,” *Billboard*, April 26, 2010, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/viral-videos/958476/mias-born-free-video-banned-from-youtube-for-graphic-violence>.

violence in a way that draws attention to the arbitrariness of this logic.”<sup>83</sup> Likewise, Lars Eckstein argues that the video works as an allegory for viewing the vulnerability of minorities by making the persecuted group one that is “firmly placed in the West.”<sup>84</sup> Alexander Weheliye also sees the ginger as allegorical, but argues that using gingers as the targets of violence is not a just a substitution of the “not oppressed group” for the “oppressed group.” Rather, using redheaded men in the music video works to highlight his concept of racializing assemblages. Weheliye, in critiquing Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben’s analyses of racism, argues that political processes of subjugation are often veiled by focusing on biological markers as the defining features of how racial categories are made. Sociopolitical hierarchies then are camouflaged by the natural features of the human body.<sup>85</sup>

Overall, academic interest in the ginger figure has been its use as an allegory that sheds light on the arbitrariness of racial distinctions. As I discussed in the previous example of Shea Moisture, the ginger can stand in for “any” difference. However, to argue that the use of gingers in the role of the persecuted is “arbitrary” ignores social context. By 2010 when the video was released, the phenotypical appearance of the ginger figure, especially the ginger man, was already coded as Other in various ways and was explicitly not arbitrary. One need not look any further than the *South Park* “Ginger Kids” episode and the ensuing “Kick a Ginger Day,” to see this; if the designation were truly arbitrary, that would not have happened. The episode tapped

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<sup>83</sup> Brian Creech, “Refugee Status: Tracing the Global Flows of M.I.A.,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 7 (2014): 277-80.

<sup>84</sup> Lars Eckstein, “M.I.A.’s ‘Born Free’ and the Ambivalent Politics of Authenticity and Provocation,” *Hard Times* 88, no. 2 (2010): 34-7.

<sup>85</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeus Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 67-71.



into a cultural prejudice that had already existed, albeit not in a well-formed manner. As cited in Chapter Two, Parker and Stone chose gingers for this very reason.

I believe that the figure of the ginger can be subversive. As I have argued, the ginger phenomenon does call attention to the constructedness of whiteness, which in turn makes visible the arbitrariness of racial categories, as Creech and Eckstein, and also Weheliye (to a lesser extent) argue. However, what none of these academic analyses takes into account is that the ginger figure is a reflection of anxieties about whiteness. Therefore, any time the ginger is used as a “substitution” for another group, it is not a value-neutral allegory, but rather a commentary about whiteness itself.

### **5.2.3 Gingers as excessively white**

Gingers represent a version of marked whiteness. As Mary Bucholtz summarized in her work on nerdy white youth, they “were not normal because they were too normal, not (unmarkedly) white because they were too white.”<sup>86</sup> The power of whiteness is in its normalcy and nothing-specialness; therefore, too much whiteness can be perceived as negative. Richard Dyer likewise discusses the concept of what he calls extreme whiteness. As he explains, “the extreme, very white white image is functional in relation to the ordinary, is even perhaps a condition of establishing whiteness as ordinary.”<sup>87</sup> It is often said that whiteness positions itself against blackness; however, normative whiteness also positions itself against extreme whiteness. Following Dyer, I argue that gingers represent what I call excessive whiteness. Excessive

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<sup>86</sup> Bucholtz, “The Whiteness of Nerds,” 96.

<sup>87</sup> Dyer, *White*, 222.

whiteness is similar to Dyer's conception of extreme whiteness, but differs in one key way. Dyer's extreme whiteness represents power; he states that white people both fear and aspire to such representations. Example figures representing Dyer's extreme whiteness include the glowing virginal woman and the hyper-muscular action star. The ginger's excessive whiteness, in contrast, represents a lack of such power. White people do fear, but definitely do not aspire to be like the ginger. The term "excessive" also reflects the affects of disgust discussed in Chapter Three, with which the overwhelmingly pale (and freckled) bodies of redheaded people are often met.

Extreme and excessive whiteness can also both work as distractions, again in slightly different ways. Dyer claims that extreme whiteness, in the contexts of the height of the British empire or during the Facist eras, for example, distracts from ordinary whiteness.<sup>88</sup> Looking back on such contexts of political and social power, white people can see themselves as separate from this kind of whiteness (and thus absolve themselves of some guilt); but again, they both fear and desire it. I am arguing, however, that Dyer's conception of extreme whiteness, which is violent, controlling, etc. is increasingly what now passes for normative whiteness. The excessive whiteness of the ginger therefore also acts as a distraction, but its purpose is twofold: it both distracts white people away from the fact that their status and power are contingent and may be undermined, as previously discussed, and it simultaneously distracts from the fact that normative whiteness is so evil. In both cases, the ginger is used to make mainstream whiteness look "better," but in different ways: either cooler or more benevolent. Extreme whiteness is thus ambivalently perceived, but excessive whiteness is perceived only negatively.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 223.

In this section, I will consider two case studies that position gingers as excessively white in comparison to both blackness and normative whiteness. I will return to some themes from Chapter Three because there is overlap in the analyses of race and gender, which cannot be disentangled. Increasingly, within popular media, I have noticed the juxtaposition of black characters with white redheaded characters. There are many examples of this pairing, such as Lucas and Max in *Stranger Things*, the “San Junipero” episode of *Black Mirror*, comedians Eri Jackson and Daniel Taylor of “Ginger & Black,” and press coverage of pro-football players AJ Green and Andy Dalton.<sup>89</sup> Relationships portrayed between black people and white redheaded people often follow the cool/nerdy dichotomy described in Chapter Three.<sup>90</sup> These relationships are perceived as either comical or unbelievable, because the categories of black and white are already diametrically opposed—and gingerness is at the extreme end of whiteness.

In what follows, I will first consider another viral video from Conan O’Brien’s late night show in which he explores a dating app with actor James Franco. Then, I will turn to a case that was widely publicized online: twins that “couldn’t look more different if they tried,” Maria and Lucy Aylmeda.<sup>91</sup> In each of these examples the redheaded figure is contrasted with a black figure(s) who is portrayed as cooler and more attractive of the two. Additionally, in both of these cases, the redheaded figure is also contrasted with normative whiteness, in slightly different ways.

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<sup>89</sup> Geoff Hobson, “Defining Draft,” *Cincinnati Bengals*, April 27, 2016, <http://www.bengals.com/news/article-1/Defining-draft/d499290e-6da7-49f4-969d-0e4cee6a702c>.

<sup>90</sup> The *Stranger Things* example is an exception, which perhaps represents an inverse of this relationship.

<sup>91</sup> John Shammass, “Black and White Twins: Meet the Sisters who 'Couldn't Look More Different if they Tried',” *Mirror*, March 4, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/03/03/living/feat-black-white-twins/index.html>.

### 5.2.3.1 Conan O'Brien's excessive whiteness

In Chapter Three, I described how ginger nerd masculinity is positioned as antithetical to cool black masculinity in internet memes, such as the Overconfident Ginger who “auditions for jazz band” and “doesn’t have enough soul.” In the example that follows, I will return to this theme and to the example of Conan O'Brien. In the viral video I will analyze, “gingerness” is not a named focus, however, the skit underlies racial and gender politics that make the ginger phenomenon possible. On YouTube on July 18, 2014, Team Coco published “Dave Franco & Conan Join Tinder.”<sup>92</sup> The video has been viewed almost 18 million times and is an example of O'Brien's continued embrace of social media and so-called internet culture, both by being hosted on YouTube and by focusing on an app as content.

O'Brien opens the video explaining that the young people in his office have been talking about the popular “hookup app,” Tinder and states, “naturally, because I’m a creep, I’m intrigued. I want to find out about this.” O'Brien's labeling of himself as a creep is funny to the audience, rather than threatening, again because of the contradictions embedded in the white nerd masculine identity. As Willey and Subramaniam explain in their work on *The Big Bang Theory*, audiences understand nerd misogyny as “safe to laugh at. These men are metaphorically impotent and therefore can do no real harm.”<sup>93</sup> However, nerd misogyny, as has been shown in recent years, can be particularly violent and insidious, as shown through events such as

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<sup>92</sup> Team Coco, “Dave Franco & Conan Join Tinder,” July 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkiR1KjIw7k>.

<sup>93</sup> Willey and Subramaniam, “Inside the Social World of Asocials,” *Feminist Studies* 43, no. 1 (2017): 27.

Gamergate, and Elliott Rodgers' 2014 murders of six people, and inuring of fourteen, which he blamed on women rejecting his advances. Rodgers was affiliated with PUA Hate organizations, groups of men angered that the Pick Up Artist tips and techniques (described in Chapter Three) did not successfully work for them.<sup>94</sup> As ABC News Online reported, Rodgers' manifesto struck "a chord among 'nerds.'" <sup>95</sup>

In the viral video, O'Brien invites actor Dave Franco to his office and the two create profiles for the app. O'Brien suggests that they should use real pictures of themselves, but, "because we're known people, and clearly desirable, we should go by different names." The audience laughs as O'Brien terms himself, "desirable." O'Brien jokes that they will soon switch to Grindr, a similar app for specifically for gay men. Franco questions why he is familiar with Grindr, and O'Brien replies that whenever he is not on television, he is on Grindr. O'Brien here gestures to his position as a failed exemplar of masculinity, in his usual self-effacing manner; however, in this case, it is not at the expense of women, but at the expense of gay men. Despite referring to his own subordinated masculinity, his homophobic joke still shows how he hopes to access the power of hegemonic masculinity.

Showing that he is familiar with popular internet culture, O'Brien jokes that while lying about their ages online, the two men are doing something that probably has never been done before—lying on the internet. The profile he creates for himself reads: "I love chai lattes and showering," again, non-hegemonic masculine traits. O'Brien's first match is with a white woman

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<sup>94</sup> Michael Koziol, "Elliott Rodger and the Creepy World of the Pick-Up Artist," *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 28, 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/elliott-rodger-and-the-creepy-world-of-the-pickup-artist-20140528-zrqq1.html>.

<sup>95</sup> Rheana Murray, "Santa Barbara Killer Elliot Rodger's Isolation Strikes a Chord Among 'Nerds,'" *ABC News*, May 28, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/santa-barbara-killers-isolation-strikes-chord-nerds/story?id=23900575>.

named Gloria who is seventy-four years old. The men triumph when O'Brien and Gloria both "swipe right." Eschewing the app, O'Brien writes a letter to Gloria on a typewriter, "in a way she'll understand," thus making fun of her age. Halfway through the video, it is revealed that Franco has made nine matches, while O'Brien has had only one. Conan grimaces, feigning anger and obsession, "You know what the flaw with this app is? I wish there was a way we could know their address, even if they didn't want us to know it. Then we could go there and *make* them like us." The joke is funny because as a ginger (nerd), his masculinity is perceived as passive and non-threatening. Yet again, we know from recent events that this type of masculine entitlement has real, potentially deadly, consequences for women. In this section of the clip, Franco is positioned as normatively white, dominantly masculine, through his heterosexual desirability and capability. O'Brien, as the excessively white, nerdy ginger, contrasts with him.

Franco matches with a young black woman named Courtney and tells her via the app that he is filming a bit with Conan O'Brien. He asks her if she will meet up with them. She agrees to meet with them at her brother's house. As the men depart to meet Courtney, O'Brien shows Franco his "Tinder Van," an old model van painted brown with Native American imagery. O'Brien states, "It says we're on the hunt; we are on the prowl," using language associated with aggressive masculinity and stereotypical conceptions of Native Americanness. Inside the van we see a futon and beverages, including alcohol. Franco exclaims, holding it, "We should probably get rid of the duct tape," to which the audience responds with laughter. O'Brien remarks, "I've never more felt like a murderer on the prowl. This doesn't feel good, being in this van." When they meet Courtney outside of her brother's house, O'Brien growls, "hello," and awkwardly puts

his arms out for a hug, without actually embracing her, until she reluctantly moves forward and embraces him.<sup>96</sup>

Inside the house, O'Brien asks Courtney what attracted her to about Franco's profile. Franco clarifies that it was not "Dave Franco" who appealed to her, but "Djangus Roundstone" (the pseudonym he used on Tinder). One of Courtney's male acquaintances, all of whom are black, fist bumps Franco in support of the name. Franco shares that "The D is silent, baby!" and slaps hands with the man, then moves in for a side hug, attempting to perform or imitate cool black masculinity. By doing so, Franco distances himself even further from O'Brien's excessive white masculinity, since the co-option of the aesthetics black masculinity is in fact part of the construction of normative white masculinity.

Not wanting to be left out, O'Brien asks how the men feel about his pseudonym, "Chip Whittley?" The men do not approve and say it sounds like a name for "assaulters, like a pedophile." It also sounds like a very stereotypically white name, in comparison to "Djangus Roundstone." O'Brien wonders, "Why does everybody like him [Franco]?!" One of Courtney's friends apparently replies off camera that Franco is attractive. In response, O'Brien says, "Hold on a second. You just said, he's got the natural looks. What's wrong with what I (have)?" The second man responds, "you're tall and goofy." The man himself is tall, and Conan exclaims, "Speak for yourself!" The man gestures at himself in disbelief, as in, how could he be perceived as goofy? As a younger, black, well-dressed man, he embodies a significantly different type of masculinity than O'Brien. At the end of the clip, O'Brien gives the shortest man in the group champagne and says "I'm doing better with you, than with anyone I've tried to meet on Tinder tonight," again conflating his lack of heterosexual desirability with homosexuality. In this skit,

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<sup>96</sup> O'Brien often does this same growl on his show whenever he has attractive women as guests.

O'Brien's excessive whiteness is not only contrasted with the cool black masculinity of Courtney's brother and his friends, but is also contrasted with Franco's normative white masculinity. The clear separation of O'Brien's masculinity from Franco's protects Franco's normative white masculinity from being "tainted" with accusations of nerdiness or weakness.

### 5.2.3.2 Ginger and black twins

In 2014, teenage twin sisters, Lucy and Maria Aylmer, became viral media sensations. Over the next two years, the young women were featured in a series of interviews with international major mainstream press, including the *Daily Mail*, the *New York Post*, the *Independent*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Huffington Post*, *Metro*, *ITV*, *CNN*, and others.<sup>97</sup> Their story was also picked up by many US-based popular culture sites, such as *Bored Panda*, *Vox*, and *Buzzfeed*.<sup>98</sup>

Media coverage of the twins' story follows patterns I have previously discussed in other chapters. For example, writers use the terms race, color, and ethnicity interchangeably and inconsistently; the women are said to have inherited "genes for white skin" and "genes for black

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<sup>97</sup> Lucy Laing, "The Twins that EVERYONE Can Tell Apart! Striking Sisters Couldn't be More Different Due to Quirk in their Mixed-Race Parentage," *Daily Mail*, March 1, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2974869/The-twins-tell-apart-Striking-sisters-couldn-t-different-quirk-mixed-raced-parentage.html>; Chris Perez, "Meet the Biracial Twins No One Believes are Sisters," *New York Post*, March 2, 2015, <https://nypost.com/2015/03/02/meet-the-bi-racial-twins-no-one-believes-are-sisters/>;

<sup>98</sup> Dovas, "These Twin Sisters Look Totally Different," *Bored Panda*, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2017/1/29/14377940/biracial-twins-black-white-race-identity>; Jenée Desmond-Harris, "The Hoopla over These "Rare" Biracial Twins Reveals how Confused People are About Racial Identity," *Vox*, January 29, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/1/29/14377940/biracial-twins-black-white-race-identity>; Richard James, "People Don't Believe That These Teenagers Are Twins," *Buzzfeed*, March 2, 2015, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/richardjames/people-dont-believe-that-these-teenagers-are-twins?utm\\_term=.qrzN5QwxW#.vsKEQP03j](https://www.buzzfeed.com/richardjames/people-dont-believe-that-these-teenagers-are-twins?utm_term=.qrzN5QwxW#.vsKEQP03j).



skin,” reflecting the reductive reporting of genetic science.<sup>99</sup> What is most interesting about the coverage is the overall descriptive exaggeration of their physical differences. Of course perceptions of physical appearance are subjective and people see different similarities amongst siblings all of the time. However, there are visible, concrete changes made to Maria and Lucy’s appearances over time, that I argue emphasize their differences and undermine their similarities.

For example, in pictures when the twins are younger, they look arguably a lot more similar than they do now. Presumably this is because when they were younger, their hair was not styled as much and they did not wear makeup. In other words, their appearances were more natural, less constructed. As children, their skin and hair colors are indeed noticeably different, but their face shapes, features, and hair textures are similar. As they get older and their appearances become more cultivated, the differences are amplified. Maria wears her hair shorter and curly, Lucy wears hers longer and straight, in a sharply angled cut. Maria has fuller eyebrows than Lucy’s thinly-arched ones. Maria wears more obvious makeup than Lucy, who wears more jewelry than Maria. Maria is typically photographed in trendy clothing, while Lucy wears more of a punk style. These cultivated differences, when combined, distance the women from one another. Furthermore, because race is conceptualized within much of the Western world as black and white and these categories are diametrically opposed, it becomes difficult to see similarities across these categories.

About a year into their media tour, the young women appeared, via webcam, on the Australian morning television show, “Sunrise.” As an introduction, host Samantha Armytage described their appearances, stating, “Maria has taken after her half-Jamaican mum, with dark

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<sup>99</sup> “The Science Of How These Twin Sisters Look So Different,” *IFL Science!*, n.d., <http://www.iflscience.com/health-and-medicine/interesting-genetics-these-girls-are-twins/>.

skin, and brown eyes, and curly dark hair, while Lucy got her dad's fair skin, good on her, along with straight red hair and blue eyes." Immediately following the interview, people were horrified by the racist implications of Armytage's "good on her," comment. Armytage responded that she felt terrible about what she had said, and that she meant it as a "dig at herself," in solidarity with Lucy, because she often jokes about her own very pale skin and the difficulties it causes her in the sunny Australian environment.<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, members of the audience, outraged by Armytage's comment and the lack of media attention it originally garnered, created an online Change.Org petition, demanding an apology from "Sunrise," its producer, and the network on which the show aired.<sup>101</sup>

Despite this public backlash, the sisters responded by supporting Armytage. In a Facebook post that got wide online media coverage thanks to its inclusion in a BuzzFeed article, Maria wrote that Armytage's comment was "like the saying, 'gingers got to stick together,' she was just having one of those moments." Here, Maria differentiates between the upset audience's interpretation of her sister's skin as white, and the host's comment, which Maria believes frames her as ginger,<sup>102</sup> even though Armytage, the host, does not have red hair. Furthermore, Maria also points to the fact that public response to the twins' story was to compare their attractiveness, often suggesting that Maria was more attractive. She states, "I've seen plenty of comments stating that 'the black one is beautiful. I love the black girls [sic] hair' but they aren't seem [sic]

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<sup>100</sup> Daniel Van Bloom, "I Would be Mortified if Anyone Thought I Would Say or Think Anything Racist': Sunrise Host Samantha Armytage Apologises for Congratulating Mixed-Race Twin on her 'Fair Skin' During on Air Interview," *The Daily Mail Australia*,

<sup>101</sup> "An Apology for Samantha Armytage's Racist Comment on Sunrise," *Change.Org*, 2015, <https://www.change.org/p/channel-7-sunrise-michael-pell-an-apology-for-samantha-armytage-s-racist-comment-on-sunrise>.

<sup>102</sup> Lane Sainty, "TV Guest Defends Sunrise Host After 'Racist' Comment," *Buzzfeed*, April 27, 2015, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/lanesainty/tv-guest-defends-samantha-armytage-after-racist-comment?utm\\_term=.h1l1kr3pW#.smKVaoX5k](https://www.buzzfeed.com/lanesainty/tv-guest-defends-samantha-armytage-after-racist-comment?utm_term=.h1l1kr3pW#.smKVaoX5k).

as racist?” She also said, “I think it’s so wrong how people try [to] make so many small things into skin colour and racism.” These comments clearly tap in to post-racial rhetoric, which attempt to undermine racism’s existence in the twenty-first century. However, Maria’s comment also hints at the fact that she is viewing her sister as a particular type of white person here, not a normative white person. Gingeriness is viewed as excessive whiteness in this case, in part because it is considered unattractive, but even more so, because it is positioned so far on the end of the whiteness spectrum that it is impossible it could be related to blackness.

Another example of siblings further reinforces the idea that gingeriness is opposed not only to blackness, but also to normative whiteness. In April 2013, Emma Innes reported on a story about a pair of white brothers, one of whom had red hair, and the other of whom had dark brown hair, in the *Daily Mail*.<sup>103</sup> The headline reads, “Believe it or Not, We Really ARE Brothers! Boy, 17, Builds DNA Testing Machine in his Bedroom to Find Out Why His Younger Sibling Has Ginger Hair.” Innes states, “After putting up with endless jokes about the boys having different fathers, 17-year-old Fred settled the matter once and for all – by designing his very own DNA testing machine.” Rather than testing for their shared paternal DNA, however, Fred’s test set out to prove that Gus had a mutation on the MC1R gene. Or, as the article unsurprisingly imprecisely claims, “Analysis there showed that Gus’s DNA did have the ginger mutation in its sequencing code.” Again, the difference between the brothers, even though they are both white, in this case, is deemed so severe that science was called upon to prove their relation. However, instead of even doing that, science merely proved that Gus has a mutation, or

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<sup>103</sup> Emma Innes, “Believe it or Not, We Really ARE Brothers! Boy, 17, Builds DNA Testing Machine in his Bedroom to Find Out Why His Younger Sibling Has Ginger Hair,” *Daily Mail*, April 5, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2304413/Teenager-astounds-scientists-building-DNA-testing-machine-bedroom--did-discover-brother-ginger.html>.

was abnormal in some way. As with Lucy and Maria, in the images that accompany the text, the “different” physical feature, which in this case is limited to only hair color, is exaggerated. Gus’s (the redheaded brother) hair is much longer and its curly texture has clearly been teased, giving it extra height. Fred’s (the brunette brother) hair is much shorter, worn in a more typical masculine style. In each of these examples, gingers are still considered white, but a particular kind of whiteness, not the normative type. By contrasting gingeriness with normative whiteness, normative whiteness is distanced from the negative qualities that gingeriness represents.

#### **5.2.4 Gingers as Other**

A few years ago I attended a comedy show in Pittsburgh. At the show, I was somewhat surprised to hear a ginger joke told by a black comedian, since the ginger phenomenon is largely a product of white online culture. The premise of the joke was that the comedian recognized white people’s racism towards black people as an everyday experience, but he had recently been surprised to find out that white people are “even more racist” towards another group: gingers. The comedian continued to joke about all the ways in which ginger people are considered unattractive and strange, and concluded in the end that for all of the problems he experiences as a black man, he was glad he does not have red hair. In this instance, of course, framing ginger prejudice as “racism” was played as an ironic joke, and the potentially dangerous implications of joking about gingerism as racism were undermined by the fact that the joke-teller was part of a recognizably oppressed group, himself. However, while the comparison of racism and gingerism here was played for laughs, at other times, it is completely serious. When this happens, it is concerning and quickly leads into panicked discourses of “reverse racism,” as I discussed in the first section.

After considering the joke, I found myself thinking, when do white people Other themselves? Historically, white people have done so when there are threats to whiteness's hegemony. For example, Dyer notes that, "British ideological investment in race categories increased in response to spectacular resistance to its Empire, notably the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and the Jamaican revolt of 1865."<sup>104</sup> Likewise, it was only after the rise of the Civil Rights Movement that white Americans redefined themselves in terms of "ethnicities," after having been secured as white for several decades.<sup>105</sup> White Americans, made uncomfortable or embarrassed by their visible skin color during the shift towards multiculturalism, sought to rediscover their "roots."<sup>106</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson details this history in his book, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America*. For example, Jacobson describes how for Italian Americans whose ancestors (especially those from southern Italy) were also viewed in an "in-between" way during immigration, the novel *The Godfather* offers two fantasies. First, it presents the past as a time of more "noble" principles than the present, for Italian Americans. Second, it idealizes ghetto-living—but only for those who lived it in the past; engaging with this narrative does not foster empathy for people of non-white marginalized groups living in dire conditions today.<sup>107</sup>

In the cases Jacobson discusses, whiteness is typified and at times even Othered to make white people feel proud and seem "special"—to claim a history with a positive valence of struggle and triumph. In the ginger phenomenon, the opposite takes place. Within the phenomenon, gingers are Othered, not to highlight them as extraordinary, but to allow normative

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<sup>104</sup> Dyer, *White*, 127.

<sup>105</sup> Painter, *The History of White People*, 229.

<sup>106</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

whiteness to maintain its position as precisely ordinary, as unmarked, and as such, universally powerful.

In this section, I will describe the final way that gingers are interpreted: as Others. Again, I am not claiming that gingers are not white and do not experience all concurrent white privileges, but rather that public interpretation, especially online, at time frames them in this way. This happens often when people use claims of historical Irish and Jewish oppression out of context to explain the international ginger phenomenon as it exists today. In what follows, I will examine a post-colonial reading of red hair, in the context of Irish oppression. Then, I will look at the movement to claim red hair, or gingeriness, as a protected class, under the law.

#### 5.2.4.1 Red hair as Irishness

In her reading of the redheaded woman as a cultural icon in the Anglo world, Amanda Third suggests that redheaded women are contemporarily understood in ambivalent ways because of England's colonization and subsequent racialization of Ireland.<sup>108</sup> Third argues that, "in the context of a form of racialization where chromatism as a category of difference was not easily deployed to construct the colonial other, red hair became one clear physical marker, among others, of Celtic or Irish difference."<sup>109</sup> In other words, because the English looked quite similar to the Irish, physically, differences had to be created or exaggerated in order to justify their superiority over them. Third's postcolonial reading works to explain some aspects of the ginger

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<sup>108</sup> Amanda Third, "Does the Rug Match the Carpet? Race, Gender and the Redheaded Woman," in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 221.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

phenomenon. For instance, I cited her in Chapter Three on gender because she rightly describes how the female redhead is depicted as exotic in Anglo cultures. Third argues that this is because Irish people have historically been constructed as “not at home” within Ireland and also not welcomed into the countries to which they emigrated en masse.<sup>110</sup> Similarly, the redheaded woman is often depicted as simultaneously desirable and threatening, in line with the depictions of women from many other colonized groups.<sup>111</sup> Ireland as a whole was also feminized and made to seem weak, subservient, and disempowered by England.<sup>112</sup> Again, this is a common technique of colonial powers. At the same time, however, there is also evidence that Irish maleness was constructed in an opposite way during Victorian England. During this time, English masculinity was defined by self-control, while Irish masculinity associated with brutishness and violence.<sup>113</sup> Irish masculinity was therefore constructed in contradictory ways, and was not always feminized in the way that ginger masculinity is today, but in fact viewed in an opposite, and what would be considered today, hypermasculine manner.

Based on Third’s argument, redheads can be placed then into Homi Bhabha’s category of “almost the same, but not quite.”<sup>114</sup> While this theoretical argument offers a compelling explanation for part of what is happening in the cultural distaste towards red hair, it is complicated in four ways by the ginger phenomenon. First, while the use of postcolonial theory makes sense insofar as explaining the Irish experience within Ireland and England, it seems to be a stretch to draw this connection to modern-day America, Canada, and Australia where the

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 237, 239.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>113</sup> Rónán McDonald, “Nothing to Be Done: Masculinity and the Emergence of Irish Modernism,” in *Modernism and Masculinity*, ed. Natalya Lusty and Julian Murphet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 73.

<sup>114</sup> Third, “Does the Curtain Match the Rug?,” 221.

histories of Irishness are in some ways similar, but in others quite distinct.<sup>115</sup> Second, the empirical evidence that Third offers to support her claim that redheadedness was a colonial marker of Irishness is limited to a few instances of physiognomical “data” which discussed the “sanguine type” as inferior.<sup>116</sup> Her evidence makes a compelling case for the scientific racialization of Irish people in general, but is not specific to redheadedness, except for a few fleeting references. Third, the analysis here focuses on the redheaded woman, neglecting the particularities of the construction of the redheaded man, which is not ambivalent, but extremely particular, as I have argued. Finally, as in the social science research on red hair discussed in Chapter Two, Third focuses singularly on red hair, and not the other phenotypical features such as extremely pale skin, freckles, and light eyelashes and eyebrows, and thus does not distinguish redheadedness from gingeriness. Third’s postcolonial reading of red hair as a Celtic trait is a clear example of the interpretation of redheadedness as an Othered category, but it does not get at the specificity of the ginger type. In the next section, I will consider another way in which gingers are Othered: through the attempt to label them as a protected class.

#### 5.2.4.2 Gingers as a legally protected class

In 2013, fifteen-year-old Helena Farrell took her own life after years of being bullied for her red hair, light skin, and freckles. Following her death, her father called for ginger-bullying to be

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<sup>115</sup> Dyer, *White*, 53.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 233. The sanguine type is described as having “reddish hair, blue eyes and a ruddy complexion.”



considered a hate crime.<sup>117</sup> Farrell's suicide was just one of several that has occurred during the rise of the ginger meme, but it was the first to bring major attention to the issue of hate crime classification. Subsequently, headlines about ginger hate crimes spread rapidly online, largely thanks to the international readership of press like the *Daily Mail* and the *Telegraph*, as well as the ability to easily share these links from ginger pride Facebook pages, based not only in the UK, but in the US, Australia, and Canada, as well. Popular press has framed gingerism as a hate crime in number of examples: workplace discrimination, a bomb threat, physical violence, a stabbing, vandalism, graffiti, verbal abuse, and of course, as alluded to in Chapter Two, the online organization and advertising of Kick a Ginger Day.<sup>118</sup>

Legally, in order to be considered a protected class, gingers need to be a marginalized group. Therefore, I argue that those seeking to classify gingerism as a hate crime position and/or

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<sup>117</sup> Eleanor Harding, "Helena Farrell, 15, Killed Herself after Being 'Bullied for Being Ginger,'" *Daily Mail*, November 28, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2514859/Helena-Farrell-15-killed-bullied-ginger.html>.

<sup>118</sup> Tom Embury-Dennis, "Man Called 'Fat Ginger Pikey' by Boss Loses Race Discrimination Claim," *Independent*, January 12, 2018, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/man-fat-ginger-pikey-salad-dodger-boss-race-discrimination-claim-lose-traveller-san-francisco-london-a8154001.html>; Andrew Levy, "Police Admits It's Now Treating Insults Against People with Ginger Hair as Hate Crime," *Daily Mail*, November 11, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3929110/Simply-mad-Police-force-admits-s-treating-insults-against-people-ginger-hair-hate-crime.html>; Hannah Crouch, "Red Alert: Essex Cops Probe Spate of 'Hate Crimes' Against People with Ginger Hair," *Sun*, November 11, 2016, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/2167494/essex-cops-hate-crimes-ginger-hair/>; Nelson Jones, "Should Ginger-Bashing be Considered a Hate Crime?" *New Statesman*, January 10, 2013, <https://www.newstatesman.com/nelson-jones/2013/01/should-ginger-bashing-be-considered-hate-crime>; "Police Investigating 'Ginger Hate Crime' Graffiti," *ITV*, August 21, 2015, <http://www.itv.com/news/2015-08-21/police-investigating-ginger-hate-crime-graffiti>; Andrew Robinson, "Ginger Haired Man Describes Abuse He Suffered as Crimes against Redheads Reach Shocking Levels," *Examiner*, September 27, 2016, <https://www.examiner.co.uk/news/west-yorkshire-news/ginger-haired-man-describes-abuse-11944254>; Rob Grant, "'Gingerism' Hate Crime Incidents Revealed by Police Show Abuse People Face Because of their Hair Colour," *Mirror*, August 6, 2015, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/gingerism-hate-crime-incidents-revealed-6200149>.

understand gingers as Other. Across England, there are five categories of hate crimes. A hate crime must be based on either: race/ethnicity, disability, religion/belief, sexual orientation, or transgender identity.<sup>119</sup> Hair color, not surprisingly, is not included as one of these categories. However, local governments can choose to add additional categories at their own discretion.<sup>120</sup> Notably, the call to label gingerism as a hate crime came only after another surprising group was given this status: goths. Police investigators in Greater Manchester recognized “alternative sub-cultures” as a protected class in 2013, after a young goth woman was murdered.<sup>121</sup> Sensationalist online press often ignored the designation of “alternative sub-cultures,” however, and represented the story as though protections for goths specifically were being put into place.<sup>122</sup> In November 2016, police in Essex held a town hall meeting in which they claimed they were investigating two instances of gingerism as hate crimes. Later, a spokesperson for the police said that the issues were more complex and that hair color had been “mistakenly recorded as an

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<sup>119</sup> Aoife O’Neil, “Hate Crime: England and Wales 2016/17,” statistical bulletin published by the UK *Home Office*, October 17, 2017,

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/652136/hate-crime-1617-hosb1717.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/652136/hate-crime-1617-hosb1717.pdf).

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>121</sup> “GMP Begins to Record Alternative Sub-Culture Hate Crimes,” *Greater Manchester Police*, April 5, 2013

<http://www.gmp.police.uk/content/WebsitePages/BCE5CBFBA182F06380257B43002A81E5>.

<sup>122</sup> See, for example: Martin Evans, “Hate Crimes to Include Attacks on Punks, Goths and Metallars,” *Telegraph*, April 3, 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/9969457/Hate-crimes-to-include-attacks-on-punks-goths-and-metallars.html>; Simon Price, “Violence Against Goths is a Hate Crime,” *Guardian-US Edition*, April 4, 2013,

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/04/violence-against-goths-hate-crime>;

Ollie John, “England: Goths, Punks Can Now Be Hate-Crime Victims in Manchester,” *Time*, April 5, 2013, <http://newsfeed.time.com/2013/04/05/goths-and-punks-can-now-be-hate-crime-victims-in-the-u-k>.

aggravating factor.” Despite this correction, online news articles typically relegated her comment to the end of the story and used headlines that reflected the original statement.<sup>123</sup>

It is possible that the appeal to “hate crimes” as a way to describe gingerism is an intentionally inflammatory strategy intended to call attention to and legitimize red hair prejudice as serious. In an interview with *Metro*, a spokesperson for the Cumbria police (where Helena Farrell lived at the time of her death) said that as of yet, they did not plan to change any policies, but whether or not an assault met the definition of a hate crime, it would be investigated with full integrity.<sup>124</sup> However, clearly those seeking to add gingers as a protected class do not believe this to be true. Ben Berry, a councilor from Windemere, stated in an interview that, “People laugh at me when I say it’s almost as if ginger-haired people are our own race....But it’s like that—we’re beaten and made fun of just the same as someone is by a racist because they’re black.”<sup>125</sup> Berry’s comments show how he believes his negative treatment is not viewed as severe by others. In an effort to legitimize its seriousness, he compares gingerism to the oppression of black people. Berry’s comparison is part of a long history of marginalized groups, often led by their white members, who co-opt black struggle for their own political gain. For example, this famously happened during the first wave women’s movement and was subsequently perpetuated by white third/fourth wave feminists during a press campaign for the film *Suffragette*. Actresses Meryl Streep and Carey Mulligan were photographed wearing t-shirts that read, “I’d rather be a rebel

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<sup>123</sup> See, for example, “‘Ginger Abuse is a Hate Crime’: Essex Officer Tells Public Meeting Police have Received Complaints of Abuse against Redheads,” *Echo*, November 15, 2016, [http://www.echo-news.co.uk/news/14906469.\\_Ginger\\_abuse\\_is\\_a\\_hate\\_crime\\_\\_\\_Essex\\_officer\\_tells\\_public\\_meeting\\_police\\_have\\_received\\_complaints\\_of\\_abuse\\_against\\_redheads](http://www.echo-news.co.uk/news/14906469._Ginger_abuse_is_a_hate_crime___Essex_officer_tells_public_meeting_police_have_received_complaints_of_abuse_against_redheads).

<sup>124</sup> Tariq Tahir, “Ginger Bullying ‘Is Hate Crime’, Says Father of Dead School Girl,” *Metro*, November 28, 2013, <http://metro.co.uk/2013/11/28/enda-farrell-ginger-bullying-is-a-crime-of-hatred-4206623/>.

<sup>125</sup> Harding, “Helena Farrell.”

than a slave.”<sup>126</sup> The use of this quote from British suffragette Emmaline Pankhurst was met with immediate criticism online. As Nicola Rivers, Karen Dade, Carlie Tartakov, Connie Hargrave, Patricia Leigh, and others have argued, the suffragette movements in both the US and UK persistently excluded black women, while exploiting them as political pawns.<sup>127</sup> Therefore, using this quote to advertise a movie that focuses on the success of white women at the expense of black women is deeply problematic. Likewise, Berry’s comments use the oppression of black people as a way to claim that gingerism is a serious problem. However, nowhere in the discourse surrounding gingerism as a hate crime, is there any attempt to engage in political struggle that would help both groups.

Labeling an attack as a hate crime can lead to symbolic and social support for members of marginalized groups.<sup>128</sup> Hate crimes are an instrument of intimidation and control against those who threaten the dominant social order.<sup>129</sup> Insofar as the existence of the ginger type does reflect a threat to hegemonic whiteness, the definition could apply in this sense. However, hate crimes are also visible manifestations of the structural and institutional oppression that make them possible.<sup>130</sup> Despite the (at times violent and shocking) examples listed above that have been labeled in popular online media as hate crimes against gingers, there is no evidence for

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<sup>126</sup> Alex Ritman, “Meryl Streep's 'Suffragette' T-Shirt Sparks Backlash,” *Hollywood Reporter*, October 6, 2015, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/meryl-streeps-suffragette-t-shirt-829729>.

<sup>127</sup> Nicola Rivers, “Introduction,” *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1-6; Karen Dade, Carlie Tartakov, Connie Hargrave, Patricia Leigh, “Assessing the Impact of Racism on Black Faculty in White Academe: A Collective Case Study of African American Female Faculty,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 39, no. 2 (2015): 134-46.

<sup>128</sup> James B. Jacobs and Kimberly Potter, *Hate Crimes: Criminal Law and Identity Politics* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 5.

<sup>129</sup> Barbara Perry, *In the Name of Hate: Understanding Hate Crimes* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 2.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

widespread institutional or structural oppression of gingers. Rather, the most serious manifestations of phenomenon tend to reflect interpersonal transgressions. Those not in favor of giving gingerism the designation of a hate crime tend to interpret redheaded people in one of the other previously mentioned ways. For example, Emma Kelly of the site Ginger Parrot and Jacky Colliss Harvey, author of a book about redheaded history, both publically stated they were against labeling gingerism a hate crime. Rather, each of them proposed the development of anti-bullying and empathy-building campaigns to deal with ginger prejudice. They suggest that red hair is akin to any other characteristic that might get one targeted by bullies, like glasses, for example.<sup>131</sup> In this way, these women use the idea of gingeriness to stand in for other social differences, albeit more minor ones than I described in the section on gingeriness standing in for blackness.

### 5.3 CONCLUSION

I have argued that the ginger phenomenon makes whiteness visible and exposes its contingencies and limits. In doing so, it potentially undermines whiteness's position as a naturally superior and universal category. However, the public interprets the ginger phenomenon in various ways, and not all of these interpretations lead to undermining whiteness. In fact some of them make dangerous comparisons to and conflate with other kinds of discrimination, without

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<sup>131</sup> Emma Kelly, "Should the Victimisation of Gingers be Classed as a Hate Crime?" *Ginger Parrot*, December 2, 2013, <https://gingerparrot.co.uk/2013/12/should-the-victimisation-of-gingers-be-classed-as-a-hate-crime/>; Nick Bramhill, "Discrimination Against Redheads Very Real, Says Author," *Irish Central*, March 20, 2017, <https://www.irishcentral.com/culture/entertainment/discrimination-against-redheads-very-real-says-author>.

considering power relations, history, or geographical and cultural context. I have also argued that gingers are a pseudoracialized group; they are subjected to certain aspects of racial formation, such as the typification and scientization of their physical appearances. However, their whiteness is, in Dyer's terms, socially guaranteed. Their positions of power are not meaningfully threatened by the above processes, and thus they are not fully racialized as Other.

Analyzing both on and offline discourse shows that when people respond to the ginger phenomenon, they typically do so in four different, but overlapping ways. They interpret or position gingers: as a stand-in for whiteness, as a stand in for *any* social difference, as an excessive version of whiteness, and as Other. The polysemy of the ginger phenomenon, which at its core reflects fears about the security of normative whiteness, makes these varied yet overlapping interpretations possible.

In the final conclusion, I will summarize each chapter's contribution and draw together the three major discourses that have produced the ginger as a socially different figure within the new media environment: gender, science, and race. I will also discuss in more depth the growing online "ginger pride movement" and consider its implications for the future of this phenomenon.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

As I was writing this dissertation, new iterations of the ginger phenomenon continued to circulate online, but for practical reasons, I had to limit the number of examples I used. However, I will share an additional story now because it both summarizes the phenomenon and points towards its continued significance. During the summer of 2017, Co-parentmatch.com, an Australian networking site that seeks to enable the creation of “loving, alternative families,” put out a call seeking sperm from men with red hair through an infographic.<sup>1</sup> The call came six years after the 2011 ban by Cryos International, leading some to believe that prejudice against ginger men was over. Notably, however, this announcement received far less media attention than the 2011 ban, though its #savegingers hashtag participated in similar sensationalist discourses.<sup>2</sup> About six months later, Massachusetts Congressman Joe Kennedy III gave a rebuttal to Donald Trump’s State of the Union Address. Immediately following his speech, right-wing-Facebook-turned-mainstream media star, Tomi Lahren, lashed out at Kennedy in a way that showed the optimism surrounding the ginger sperm recruitment was perhaps overstated. In an Instagram story, Lahren referred to Kennedy as a “nasty little ginger” a “little ginger nerd” and a “little limp dick.”<sup>3</sup> On Twitter, she continued her tirade, appealing to her audience’s presumed

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<sup>1</sup> “About,” *Co-Parent Match*, n.d., <https://www.co-parentmatch.com/about.aspx>; “Ginger Sperm Donors,” *Co-Parent Match*, July, 2017, <https://www.co-parentmatch.com/ginger-sperm-donors.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> See examples of the hashtag on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/hashtag/savegingers>.

<sup>3</sup> Ed Mazza, “Tomi Lahren Apologizes For ‘Limp Dick’ Social Media Meltdown,” *Huffington Post*, January 31, 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/tomi-lahren-joe-kennedy-meltdown\\_us\\_5a72735ce4b09a544b5665fb](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/tomi-lahren-joe-kennedy-meltdown_us_5a72735ce4b09a544b5665fb); Michallone, Clemence, “Conservative Pundit Tomi Lahren Apologizes for Publicly Branding Democratic Rep Joe Kennedy III a ‘Little Limp D\*\*k’ and a ‘Nasty Little Ginger’ after his SOTU Response,” *Daily Mail*, February 2, 2018, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-5345335/Tomi-Lahren-calls-Joe-Kennedy-limp-d-k.html>.

transphobia, asking “Is it just me or does Joe Kennedy III look a helluva lot like pre-Caitlyn Bruce Jenner?”<sup>4</sup> Finally, in a tweet that perhaps sums up the entire ginger phenomenon, Lahren wrote, “In Trump’s America, we say ALL LIVES MATTER you impotent little ginger kid.”<sup>5</sup> Lahren’s comment came in response to Kennedy’s statement of support for the Black Lives Matter movement during his rebuttal.<sup>6</sup>

Although Tomi Lahren’s rhetoric may seem extreme and geared towards a niche audience, she has moved into the mainstream. Her material circulates online seemingly endlessly and she has appeared on major television programs such as the *Daily Show* and the *View*, in addition to a variety of YouTube and podcast channels. Lahren has built her career in new media specifically by inciting fears about the impending decline of whiteness. She constantly appeals to racism and xenophobia, and is an ardent supporter and spreader of Trump’s “make America great again” rhetoric, through her work with the Great America Alliance.<sup>7</sup> Lahren’s inclusion of gingers as a problem group within her ideology shows that gingers represent something undesirable about whiteness in its current state. From her perspective, gingers are nasty, impotent nerds—qualities that could undermine the power of whiteness, specifically white masculinity. At

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<sup>4</sup> Emma Dibdin, “Tomi Lahren Apologizes For Calling Rep. Joe Kennedy ‘Nasty Ginger’ and ‘Little Limp Dick,’” *Cosmopolitan*, February 1, 2018, <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/tv/a15958117/tomi-lahren-rep-joe-kennedy-nasty-ginger-little-limp-dick/>; “Fox News Contributor Tomi Lahren Apologizes for Calling Rep. Joe Kennedy III a ‘Nasty Little Ginger,’ and Worse,” *The Week*, February 1, 2018, <http://theweek.com/speedreads/752408/fox-news-contributor-tomi-lahren-apologizes-calling-rep-joe-kennedy-iii-nasty-little-ginger-worse>.

<sup>5</sup> Samantha Grasso, “Tomi Lahren Insults Rep. Joe Kennedy with ‘Nasty Ginger,’ ‘Limp D\*\*k,’” *Daily Dot*, February 1, 2018, <https://www.dailydot.com/irl/tomi-lahren-limp-dick-kennedy/>.

<sup>6</sup> Eli Meixler, “Joe Kennedy’s State of the Union Response: Transcript,” *Time*, January 31, 2018, <http://time.com/5126157/joe-kennedy-state-of-the-union-response-transcript/>.

<sup>7</sup> Fredreka Schouten, “Commentator Tomi Lahren Lands Job with a Pro-Trump Group,” *USA Today*, May 22, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2017/05/22/tomi-lahren-joins-pro-trump-great-america-alliance/102006120/>.



the same time, Joe Kennedy's position as an extremely privileged straight white man from one of the most powerful families in American politics complicates his status as a victim here. Lahren critiqued Kennedy's inclusion of Black Lives Matter in his speech for racist reasons, but he had already been criticized by progressives for accepting the nomination for the speech, instead of deferring to a woman or person of color.<sup>8</sup> This example reflects the complexities of the ginger phenomenon. On the one hand, the phenomenon is incredibly problematic in that it frames a white group as oppressed. As I have shown, media coverage and online discussions often position gingerism as a form of, or equivalent in severity to racism. On the other hand, it is only by calling attention to the inconsistencies and limitations of whiteness, that it can begin to be undermined. In addition to gender and science, racial discourses are implicated in gingers' production as a socially different group. Through its myriad contradictions and innumerable manifestations in digital media, the ginger phenomenon affords the opportunity to analyze the construction of whiteness more closely. Lahren's demasculinizing tirade about Kennedy, which focused primarily on his gingeriness, shows how red-haired people, especially men, continue to be perceived negatively.

Linda Martín Alcoff suggests that the impending demographic changes I have discussed produce reactions which may take "hysterical forms" on the part of white people. At the same time, people who identify with normative whiteness are careful to act in ways that avoid getting

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<sup>8</sup> See examples of this criticism, such as: Natalie Goncharova, "What You Should Know About Joe Kennedy Before SOTU," *Refinery 29*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.refinery29.com/2018/01/189072/who-is-joe-kennedy-sotu>; Michael Steel, "For Democrats' State of the Union Response, Joe Kennedy is a Poor Choice," *Washington Post*, January 30, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/joe-kennedy-is-a-poor-choice-for-the-democrats-response/2018/01/30/42b88368-05d9-11e8-94e8-e8b8600ade23\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.acd7d9e8f7b1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/joe-kennedy-is-a-poor-choice-for-the-democrats-response/2018/01/30/42b88368-05d9-11e8-94e8-e8b8600ade23_story.html?utm_term=.acd7d9e8f7b1).

themselves labeled as “racist.”<sup>9</sup> The creation of the ginger online is perhaps one of these hysterical forms, but the constructed scapegoat is white, so deflecting fears onto him or her would not presumably result in one being labeled as “racist.” However, anxieties about whiteness and race, generally, have reached such heights that now even making ginger jokes is sometimes considered “racist.”

In this dissertation I have considered the development of the ginger phenomenon in the Anglo American world since 2005. I have contextualized the phenomenon in a longer history of ambivalent attitudes towards red hair, but have suggested that in its present configuration, the ginger phenomenon reflects social anxieties about whiteness. Specifically, the phenomenon is the product of fears that white people will soon be a minority and are losing social power. I have framed this phenomenon as one that has grown out of social media. The ginger’s popularity has flourished through the logic of memetics: multimodality, reappropriation, resonance, collectivism, and spread. The highly constructed images of difference that spread the phenomenon also reflect new media’s racio-visual logic.

Additionally, the ginger phenomenon is part of a growing re-attention paid towards the constructedness of whiteness as a social identity. Digital media facilitates this analysis. There are several examples of new media texts and processes that have explicitly set out to “make whiteness strange.” Some examples include satirical websites like “Stuff White People Like,” and hashtags like #OscarsSoWhite, and #whitefragility. The larger conversations about whiteness of which these texts are part have been enabled by new media connectedness and the creative possibilities of participatory culture. Though the ginger phenomenon is not an intentional example like these, its effects are arguably the same.

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<sup>9</sup> Alcott, *The Future of Whiteness*, 4.

In Chapter One, the introduction, I presented the major claims, methodologies, and social significance of this project. I argued that the creation of the ginger as a socially different kind of person has happened against a background of shifting demographics in the Anglo American world. The perceived strangeness of the ginger is a manifestation of anxieties about the future of whiteness which spread through new media. Through archival research, online discourse analysis, and oral history interviewing, I analyzed the phenomenon.

In Chapter Two, I argued that although the ginger phenomenon is a seemingly recent development, redheaded people have been viewed ambivalently for a long time. I covered the history of red hair prejudice from the ancient Egyptian times through the present. I noted that red hair has been historically stereotyped as both a Jewish and Irish feature. The ways in which red hair prejudice have played out differ slightly between geographical contexts, but such prejudice is most prevalent in (though not limited to) the US, UK, Australia, and Canada—in other words, the Anglo-American Western world. I also argued that popular media have contributed to the ambivalent cultural perceptions of people with red hair, beginning with newspapers, and moving into the digital media era. These representations are medium-specific. I shared the stories of narrators who came of age prior to the 1970s and contextualized their anecdotes within social science research from the same time-period, which found that very pale skin, freckles, and red hair, were both socially and sexually undesirable traits. Finally, I turned to the recent increase in social media content about redheaded people or gingers, which I term the ginger phenomenon. I analyzed the “Ginger Kids” episode from *South Park* and its after effects, which set the phenomenon in motion. I described the initial framing of “gingerism” as a racial issue in mass media, and the subsequent memefication of gingers in social media.

In Chapter Three, I explored the first of three major discourses that has constructed the ginger as socially different: gender. In this chapter, I argued that gender is central to the ginger's status as a scapegoat for certain negative aspects of whiteness. The phenomenon does not use the ginger as a scapegoat for *all* negative aspects of whiteness, rather only those parts of it which make it vulnerable, or the aspects of it which undermine its power. Notably, the phenomenon is silent on critiques of whiteness's history of violence and imperialism. I showed how white nerd masculinity, while subordinated in some ways, can still be an oppressive identity, one which always aims itself towards the ideal of hegemonic masculinity. I summarized the range of gendered red hair stereotypes and considered my narrators' stories about how they have impacted their lives. Men with red hair are ascribed only the weak, negative qualities of gingeriness, while women with red hair are either hypersexualized as redheads or defeminized as gingers. I attribute the woman's polysemous identity to changes in both media and demographics. I analyzed how the ginger man is demasculinized by the disgust ascribed to his physical appearance and sexuality. These affects of disgust, which also biologize gingeriness, circulate through stories and comments sections that are decontextualized from geographical and cultural specific locations. The ginger's disgustingness is most often framed through humor. I also looked more closely at two image macros, or memes, that typify red-haired people into specific categories. These memes suggest that ginger masculinity is positioned as antithetical to black masculinity. Finally, I focused on an extended case study on Conan O'Brien to show that his embrace of the ginger meme is specifically tied to its social media popularity, and thus had a profit motive.

In Chapter Four, I explored the second of three major discourses that has constructed the ginger as socially different: science. I argued that red hair is pathologized through its relationship

to variations on the MC1R gene, framed as a “mutation.” Discourses labeling red hair as a biological genetic mutation legitimize the perceived social strangeness of gingers by appealing to the authority of science. These discourses circulate primarily through popular news articles and listicles. These new media formats follow traditional mass media formats in reporting and spreading simplified information about genetic science. Particularly, I focused on the increasingly popular listicle format, which presents series of “facts” that are easily consumed by readers. I also compared the original scientific studies from which these “facts” allegedly originate, to their transformed statuses in new media content. I found that claims about redheaded science are often wildly misreported in popular media, further contributing to the ginger’s position as different.

In Chapter Five, I explored the final of the three major discourses that has constructed the ginger as socially different: race. In this chapter, I argued that theoretically, the ginger phenomenon makes whiteness strange. In this way, the ginger phenomenon has the potential to undermine whiteness’s position as a naturally superior and universal category. However, the ginger phenomenon is polysemous, and as such, it is interpreted by audiences in different ways. These interpretations may or may not undermine whiteness. Gingers are alternately, and sometimes overlappingly, interpreted as: a stand-in for whiteness, a stand in for *any* social difference, an excessive version of whiteness, and as non-white Others. I have also argued that gingers are a pseudoracialized group. Gingers are typified and their physical appearances are placed on a hierarchized spectrum. This process is done through appeals to biology.<sup>10</sup> However, gingers’ whiteness is still, in Richard Dyer’s terms, socially guaranteed.<sup>11</sup> Their positions of

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<sup>10</sup> Martinot, *The Rule of Racialization*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Dyer, *White*, 50.

power as white people are not meaningfully threatened by the above processes, even though they do mirror those of racial formation. Therefore, gingers are not fully racialized as Other, but rather are pseudoracialized.

This dissertation contributes to the field of communication by bringing together work on the logics of the new media environment with that on critical whiteness studies. In bringing these areas of research together, I have shown how the façade of whiteness's invincibility is affected by social media. The new media environment has facilitated the creation of a scapegoat onto which current anxieties about whiteness are placed. Analyzing the ginger phenomenon allows us to reexamine how whiteness works in the digital environment and points to potentially productive breaks within white supremacy. As I continue work in these areas, there are several other important questions I would like to examine. These questions mainly concern the growing "ginger pride" movement, which exists both on and offline. First, I would like to more fully analyze the ways in which the movement co-opts the rhetoric of previous struggles for civil rights. Phrases such as "Justice for Gingers," "Ginger Lives Matter," and "We're Here, We're Clear," while perhaps intended as humorous, participate in a long history of poaching from prior movements without considering the social implications of doing so. Secondly, I would like to further interrogate the commodification of the ginger identity itself, through businesses, such as the aforementioned How to Be a Redhead, and several others that have similar missions, like Everything for Redheads and Ginger Parrot. Finally, I will continue to follow the efforts to gain protective status for people with red hair. This movement is ongoing. If successful, it would constitute a further reconfiguration of whiteness and expose the increasingly complex attempts to both police and stretch the boundaries of the white identity in order to include and exclude strategic groups.

**APPENDIX A**

**DEED OF GIFT FORM**

I am currently doing research on “gingers,” or people with red hair, light skin, and freckles, and the contested issue of “gingerism.” An important part of my research is the oral history interviews I am conducting with individuals with red hair, particularly those who have been involved in redhead organizations, marches, celebrations. The purpose of the following agreement is to allow me to utilize your interview in research for my dissertation, conference presentations, and publications, and subsequently to deposit it in an archive so that other researchers may be able to benefit from your historical recollections. Please read the agreement carefully before you sign it and feel free to ask any questions you may have regarding its terms and conditions.

I \_\_\_\_\_ [interviewee] of

\_\_\_\_\_ [address, city, state, zip code]

do herein permanently donate and convey my oral history interview to Donica O’Malley. In making this gift, I understand that I am assigning all right, title, and interest in copyright to Donica O’Malley. By virtue of this assignment, Donica O’Malley will have the right to freely use my interview/s for scholarly and educational purposes. I understand that once this study is completed, Donica O’Malley may deposit my interview/s in an appropriate archive so that other researchers may be able to utilize them.

Future uses may include quotation and publication or broadcast in any media, including the internet. It also may be reproduced for pedagogical purposes in educational settings.

Restrictions

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX B

### LIST OF NARRATORS

Barbara (last name withheld at request of narrator). Interviewed on August 22, 2015 in Crosshaven, Ireland. I interviewed Barbara at the Irish Redhead Convention in 2015. Barbara was also an attendee of the “Redheads Anonymous” town hall talk.

Bowsher, Andii. Interviewed on August 5, 2015 in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Cannon, Shawn. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Shawn at the Redhead Event 2016.

Chandler, Lindsay. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Lindsay at the Redhead Event 2016.

Garratt, Luke. Interviewed on August 7, 2015 in Oxford, England.

Graham, Delia. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Delia at the Redhead Event 2016.

Dearth, Chris. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Shawn at the Redhead Event 2016.

Harmon, Krista. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Shawn at the Redhead Event 2016.

Haverkamp, Andy. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Shawn at the Redhead Event 2016.

Hendriks, Gijs. Interviewed on December 3, 2015 via Skype from Pittsburgh PA/Hechtel-Eksel, Belgium.

Hopkins, Jessica. Interviewed on January 19, 2016 in Cambridge, MA.

Gerhard (last name withheld at request of narrator). Interviewed on in August 22, 2015 Crosshaven, Ireland. I interviewed Gerhard at the Irish Redhead Convention in 2015. Gerhard was also an attendee of the “Redheads Anonymous” town hall talk.

Johnson, Dillon. Interviewed on January 19, 2016 in Cambridge, MA.

Katie (last name withheld at request of narrator). Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Katie at the Redhead Event 2016.

Kelsey (last name withheld at request of narrator). Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland,



OR. I interviewed Kelsey at the Redhead Event 2016.

Kenworthy, Eva. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Eva at the Redhead Event 2016.

Kilcullen, Maryellen (name changed at request of narrator). Interviewed on March 22, 2015 via Skype from Pittsburgh PA/Amherst, MA.

Loren (last name omitted at request of narrator). Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Loren at the Redhead Event 2016.

Marin, Catherine (name changed at request of narrator). Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Catherine at the Redhead Event 2016.

Merrill, Robert. Interviewed on in May 21, 2016 Portland, OR. I interviewed Robert at the Redhead Event 2016.

Ness, Elisabeth. Interviewed on August 22, 2015 in Crosshaven, Ireland. I met Elisabeth at the Irish Redhead Convention in 2015. Elisabeth was also the host of the “Redheads Anonymous” town hall talk.

Sterba, Heather. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Heather at the Redhead Event 2016.

Olin, Karen. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Karen at the Redhead Event 2016.

O’Shea, Steve. Interviewed on in May 21, 2016 Portland, OR. I interviewed Steve at the Redhead Event 2016.

Perrin, Justin. Interviewed on January 20, 2016 in Winthrop, MA.

Postlewait, Lori. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Lori at the Redhead Event 2016.

Schanno, Caitlin. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Caitlin at the Redhead Event 2016.

Strachan, Donna. Interviewed on August 16, 2015 in Dalkeith, Scotland.

Thron, Anna. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Anna at the Redhead Event 2016.

Vicki (last name withheld at request of narrator). Interviewed on in August 22, 2015 Crosshaven, Ireland. I interviewed Vicki at the Irish Redhead Convention in 2015. Vicki was also an attendee of the “Redheads Anonymous” town hall talk.

Wallace, Dan. Interviewed on July 9, 2016 in Winthrop, MA.

Wood, Rhonda Young. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Rhonda at the Redhead Event 2016.

Yon, Kari. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Kari at the Redhead Event 2016.

Yon, Scott. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Scott at the Redhead Event 2016.

Zecha, Angela. Interviewed on May 21, 2016 in Portland, OR. I interviewed Angela at the Redhead Event 2016.

## APPENDIX C

### DATA SOURCES CHRONOLOGICALLY LISTED

- [1540-1887] Paintings and historical images: 5 counts
- [1715-1765] Historical advertisements: 8 counts
- [1862-1882] Historical Newspapers: 4 counts
- [1866-1883] Physiognomical images: 2 counts
- [1908-1969] Novels: 4 counts
- [1939-2015] Films: 9 counts
- [1974-2017] Television episodes: 6 counts
- [2003-2018] Blogs: 13 counts
- [2005-2010] Message boards: 14 counts
- [2005-2018] Online news sources: 87 counts
- [2006-2014] Viral Videos: 12 counts
- [2010-2012] Image macros (memes): 8 counts
- [2013-2017] Listicles: 10 counts
- [2015-2015] Stock photographs: 3 counts
- [2015-2017] GIFS: 2 counts
- [2016-2017] Marketing and press materials: 2 counts

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