

November 2015

Ginger Masculinities

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<https://doi.org/10.7275/7462047> https://scholarworks.umass.edu/masters_theses_2/288

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GINGER MASCULINITIES

A Thesis Presented

by

DONICA O'MALLEY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of
Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

September 2015

Communication

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ABSTRACT

GINGER MASCULINITIES

SEPTEMBER 2015

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This paper explores white American masculinity within the “ginger” phenomenon. To guide this study, I asked: How is racism conceptualized and understood within popular culture, as seen through discussions of whether or not gingerism constitutes racism? How do commenters respond or interact when their understandings of racism or explanations for gingerism are challenged by other commenters? And finally, what does the creation of and prejudice against/making fun of a “hyperwhite” masculine identity at this social/historical moment suggest about the current stability of the dominant white masculine identity? Through discourse analysis of online comments, I explored discussions of race, gender, and gingerism. The analysis covered 6,413 comments on 102 articles. I found that within discussions of race and gingerism, readers made use of varying definitions of race and racism. Different definitions led to connotations of racism, oppression, and bullying. Simplified and individualized definitions of race and racism also led to arguments that supported frameworks of reverse racism and post-racism. So-called discrimination against redheaded men was overall considered to be more serious than for women. These arguments were bound up in questions of the specificity of cultural contexts, and ethnic and national identities, particularly with regard to Irish and Scottish immigrant heritage in the United States and United Kingdom. Future work should continue to untangle ideas of race and physical appearance and ask how whiteness is understood and works within this context.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER	
1. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
Race talk.....	8
Analyzing race and denying white privilege	11
Claiming European heritage as “other”	15
Decentered white masculinity.....	19
2. METHODS.....	25
Sampling.....	27
Risks and limitations.....	29
3. “IS GINGERISM AS BAD AS RACISM?”	30
Definitions of racism.....	30
A hypocritical double standard.....	34
Irish and Scottish as oppressed groups.....	37
Confrontations and disagreements.....	40
Conclusion.....	46
4. THE MC1R DNA TEST.....	48
Red hair as a genetic disease.....	50
Reader responses to red hair as a genetic disorder.....	52
Concern for the cultural mistreatment of redheads.....	54
The MC1R DNA Test as a precursor to eugenics.....	60

Genetic testing and masculinity	62
Conclusions.....	65
5. REBRANDING REDHEADS.....	66
Hierarchy of redheadedness.....	68
Discussions of race and colorism.....	70
Authenticity: Not real redheads.....	72
Conclusion.....	73
CONCLUSIONS.....	75
WORKS CITED.....	80

INTRODUCTION

A 2005 episode of *South Park* entitled, “Ginger Kids,” is credited with importing and popularizing the term “ginger” within the United States (Episode 911). In the United Kingdom, the term “ginger” is used to describe hair color that in the United States would typically be referred to as “red,” and is sometimes considered a derogatory term. The main character in the *South Park* episode, Eric Cartman, states in a classroom presentation:

Ginger kids: children with red hair, light skin, and freckles. We’ve all seen them, on the playground, at the store, walking on the streets. They creep us out and make us sick to our stomachs.

Since then, an explosion of “prejudice,” usually in a joking manner, has broken out against gingers on the Internet, typically in the form of memes, Facebook groups, viral videos, and comments on blogs and news articles. Despite the normally amused tone with which people discriminate against gingers, there have been isolated, more serious instances of prejudice. For example, in November of 2008, a Facebook event entitled “International Kick a Ginger Day” manifested itself in schools across Canada and the United States. Children were repeatedly kicked by classmates, targeted because of their hair color (Rolfson, 2008). In addition, in the UK there have been multiple issues of prejudice in schools, as well as legal proceedings recognizing the potential of hair color

discrimination in assault and sexual harassment cases (Fricker, 2013; Narain, 2007). More generally, over the past several years, insensitive remarks regarding gingers, as a group, have been made by public figures, celebrities, advertising campaigns, and journalists, inspiring media coverage of and public response to the remarks.

Research on the stereotypes of redheads is limited, although there are several different perspectives on how the various stereotypes have developed. Some cite anti-Semitic prejudices going back to biblical times (Roach, 2005). More contemporarily, others associate the prejudice with English discrimination against Irish and Scottish immigrants in the 18th and nineteenth centuries; this prejudice is assumed to have traveled to the US with the mass Irish immigration of the mid 1800s (Heckert & Best, 1997). Differences between stereotypes in men and women with red hair are significant. Although redheaded women historically have been sexualized in media and folklore, today they are often subjected to a beautiful/ugly dichotomy. In popular culture this can be seen by people's distinctions of the term "redhead" versus "ginger," the latter of which has a negative connotation. Redheaded men are rarely sexualized. The appearance of ginger men is more often viewed as silly, unattractive, or even repulsive. Each of these ideas is shown through the stereotype of the redheaded, effeminate, weak "nerd," most often associated with redheaded men. Stereotypes of redheaded men rather than women will be the focus of this study because the themes present in discourses around gingerism offer new insight into changing notions of white male masculinity in the US, while discourses around redheaded women tend to replicate discourses associated with any fetishized group.

The culmination of each of these stereotypes, and their pervasiveness in our culture can be seen in prejudice against redheads, now commonly referred to as “gingerism.” In the *South Park* episode that arguably began the phenomenon in the US, Cartman gives a presentation on “ginger kids,” in which he states that they suffer from a disease called “gingervitis” and are born with no souls. Although this episode was allegedly meant to be a parody of any type of racial or physical prejudice, it has spawned negative comments about gingers, which are now frequently seen in both UK and US fictional and non-fiction media. For example, scripted shows like *Glee* and *Scrubs* have poked fun at gingers, and the lack of redheaded athletes has become a joke in news reporting on sports such as baseball and rugby. Examples from advertising are prevalent, as well, especially in England.

In addition to ginger jokes, as well as actual instances of violence, other types of cultural discourses about redheads within the past few years have received a lot of attention. Specifically, two events in the scientific and medical communities have created recent online conversation about gingers. In January of 2013, UK scientists announced a DNA test that heterosexual couples could take to predict their likelihood of having a child with red hair. Various reports of this announcement present it in different ways; some reports present the test as a way to combat ginger bullying, by showing how prevalent the gene actually is within British culture, whether or not it is expressed (Hartogs, 2013). Other reports talk about it as though it is a test that would indicate couples’ odds for passing on a serious genetic disease to their potential children (Daily Mail Reporter,

2013). Similarly, in September of 2011, Cyros, the world's largest network of sperm banks announced that they would no longer take sperm donations from red-headed men, because of lack of demand from customers. The director of Cyros was quoted as saying that sperm from a red-haired donor would typically only be chosen in the case of a sterile red-haired male customer, or if a "lone" woman had a preference for red hair (Orange, 2011). Comments in response to these developments invoke a variety of discourses about race, including accusations of eugenics.

Public response to the gingerism phenomenon has taken place in large part on the Internet. People who respond online to viral images, videos, threads, and stories focus on questions about the validity of gingerism as a legitimate form of prejudice, and more specifically as racism, as well as share their own experiences with gingerism. On the one hand, public response to the gingerism phenomenon shows that popular culture understandings of racism often conflate racism with bullying, and ignore or are unaware of the systemic and structural reasons for racism. Similarly, some people may use the phenomenon to perpetuate ideas of "reverse racism" (against white people), or the idea that we are now living in a post-racist society, which means that racism is now "equal opportunity." On the other hand, the fact that the phenomenon takes place now, in a time of perceived changing demographics in the US that may present some challenges to white masculinity, makes it significant that ginger men are the target of this discrimination. They are often literally and symbolically the "whitest" men, and are consistently

portrayed or received as effeminate, ugly and weak. The creation of this category of “hyperwhiteness” serves to distance traditional white masculinity from these stereotypes, especially in contrast to (strong, cool, violent, etc.) masculinities performed by men of color.

Research questions

Sterne (1999) argues that the absence of discussions of race in cyberspace may instantiate a white ideology (p. 273). The discourses surrounding gingerism do discuss race but still maintain a white ideology by participating in what McKee (2002) terms, “white discourses,” largely ignoring the underlying factors that sustain racist ideologies and in many cases conflating what might be more appropriately termed “bullying” with racism. As Saukko (2003) explains, discourses “emerge from a specific historical context and effectuate changes that are both symbolic and very concrete” (p. 6). The emergent popularity of discourses on gingers and gingerism in recent years is concerning when considered within the framework of a culture that often espouses post-racial beliefs. Saukko further argues that on the surface, postmodern texts may appear critical of themselves and other mass media images (such as the “Ginger Kids” episode of *South Park* being read as satire of racism) but that they often “harbour many contradictory agendas” (p. 114). What historical and cultural conditions have made it possible for some people to argue that gingers, a group of white people, now constitute a racial group that

both has experienced and currently experiences discrimination? The following research questions guided my study:

RQ 1. How is racism conceptualized and understood within popular culture, as seen through discussions of whether or not gingerism constitutes racism?

RQ 2. How do commenters respond or interact when their understandings of racism or explanations for gingerism are challenged by other commenters?

RQ 3. What does the creation of and prejudice against/making fun of a “hyperwhite” masculine identity at this social/historical moment suggest about the current stability of the dominant white masculine identity?

As Denzin (1999) concludes in his own study of cybertalk, such research aims to “make visible the cultural apparatuses and biographical histories that allow such talk to be produced and understood” (p. 122). Stearne (1999) concurs, adding that the ultimate goal for this type of internet-based cultural study is not to analyze particular, isolated events or texts online, but rather to understand how possibilities for cultural meanings are created and organized, using online texts as a window into that creation.

My experience

My personal interest in this topic came from my own experiences with being “ginger.” It was not until I was in college that I heard the term, and suddenly it had become a “thing” to call someone. As a child I was self-conscious about my pale skin and freckles, but almost always received favorable attention for my hair color. Of course that was often in the context of someone talking about how “weird” “orange” hair was, and

following up with “but your color red is beautiful.” I heard countless times that redheads were only ever “really ugly” or “really beautiful.” I was aware that there was a spectrum associated with red hair, and for the most part I benefited from it, save instances of teasing over having to wear sunscreen in cloudy weather.

As an undergrad, I wrote my senior thesis about stereotypes of redheaded people in mass media. I recognized that depictions of men were almost always negative, represented as ugly, nerdy, and socially inept, and that images of redheaded women were starting to follow that trend, despite historically being sexualized. The concept of “the ginger” as a type of person gained more popularity with consistent popular news articles on the topic, as well as viral videos and memes that circulated widely online.

It was only after this that the idea of “gingerism” as something to be taken seriously began to garner attention in online media. Although I sympathized with stories about bullying and physical violence, they did not match my own experience and I was troubled by the consistent comparisons of so-called gingerism with other forms of discrimination, and particularly with racism. What follows was inspired by my attempts to understand this trend both as it relates to my own experiences, and as a broader cultural phenomenon.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much work in whiteness studies has explored the idea that white people talk about race and racism without implicating themselves in race relations. Researchers have identified multiple rhetorical techniques used to do this. For this project, one particularly relevant way in which white people deflect responsibility from involvement in racism is by claiming victimization based on negative treatment their European ancestors received upon immigrating to the US in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Belief in such dramatized family narratives and the myth of the American Dream may lead to decreased support of social welfare programs and policies designed to promote equality, such as affirmative action. Middle class, white men, in particular may feel threatened by such programs, policies, and perceived changing demographics in the US. These factors come together in today's popular culture, where lawsuits are brought against affirmative action policies, and discourses, both serious and joking, about reverse racism and discrimination are mainstream. Such beliefs are reflected in the gingerism phenomenon, which suggests insecurities about the current state of white masculinity within the context of a society that claims post-racism.

Race talk

Bonilla-Silva and Lewis (1999) have argued for the recognition of a "new racism" in the United States; in this new racism, people claim a "color-blind" view of the world, while at the same time criticizing and undermining advancements made by the civil rights movement. Like Bonilla-Silva and Lewis, Mills (2003) explains that just rejecting racism

or white-supremacist beliefs on a surface level does not produce any significant change because the existing political, social and economic structures continue to support “white domination” (p. 36). Mills further explains that these systems are the results of European colonialism and expansionism.

Many scholars have studied the appearance of these new racist discourses in everyday talk. Bucholtz (2011) defines “race talk” as a type of discourse about race and/or ethnicity that reinforces white privilege in everyday verbal communication (p. 385). In her study, she found that European American students in a racially diverse high school in California felt like they had been subjected to reverse discrimination and participated in a discourse of “racial reversal” in which they ignored “empirically observable racial asymmetries regarding material resources and structural power” (p. 387). Students likewise often participated in discourses of colorblindness by not explicitly labeling racial groups when talking about them, speaking with “referential vagueness” (p. 391).

Foster (2009) also looks at racetalk amongst young people. His study of white US college students questions the appearance of contradictions in racetalk from white Americans. In contradictory statements, students support ideas of fairness and equality, but not social welfare programs aimed to achieve these goals; he asks why these contradictions enter the popular discourse, and what purpose they serve. Use of such contradictions in everyday language allows white Americans to both blame current social racial tensions on “racial others” instead of whites, and also to preserve white privilege

and hegemony. Foster describes a discourse filled with “nonracism and optimism” that are only “skin deep” (p. 699).

Like Bucholtz and Foster, Myers (2003) sees racist ideologies present in white American’s everyday language. The prevalence of these discourses comes in reaction to what she terms “white fright,” or the fear that white Americans are becoming a minority in the United States. In response to white fright, politicians have increasingly publicly opposed social programs and attacked policies on welfare, immigration and affirmative action. Like Foster, Myers notes contradictions, or a paradox, in the way that many white Americans talk about race, propelled by such public discourses of fright. She argues that racetalk simultaneously legitimates existing social structures and celebrates white privilege, at the same time that it both categorizes and puts down non-white groups.

In contrast to Bucholtz’s and Foster’s study, Myers’s work looks specifically at private racetalk, where white people are amongst themselves, and seeks the difference between publicly claimed ideological beliefs about race, and private racist declamations. As she explains, “in a racist society, difference is not just observed, it is quantified and condemned” (p. 132). Stereotyping, caricaturing and imitating based on a person’s racial or ethnic group were commonly observed in this study. European immigrants in the 19th and 20^h centuries were also subjected to stereotyping and caricaturing; similar portrayals can be seen in visual instances of gingerism today, such as in internet memes. Although

Myers agrees with Bonilla-Silva and Lewis's conceptualization of a "new" racism, she argues that the "old" racism still persists, just in private settings.

Looking at discourses about race on the internet complicates this idea, as these discourses are often public and anonymous at the same time. Memes, defined broadly as "contagious patterns of 'cultural information,'" offer a new vehicle for racism (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). They are often shared on the internet in the form of images with overlaid text that humorously or ironically comments on the images. Knobel and Lankshear (2007) argue that memes "directly generate and shape" mindsets and behaviors in particular social groups. In an interview from 2012, two political technology gurus explain that memes as an online method of communication are popular with young people because they like being able to immediately share something that they like with their social networks. They also claim that memes contain some aspect of "truth," which makes them funny (Horowitz, 2012). The anonymity that creators of a meme can enjoy may especially appeal to those who enjoy racist or sexist jokes (Mandiberg, 2012).

Analyzing race and denying white privilege

In addition to work that sees racist ideologies in everyday language, many researchers have also produced scholarship that investigates how people deal with their own whiteness and white privilege in a variety of contexts. Shome (2000) notes deflection as one common response when white people are confronted with their privilege. White people often deflect any sense of responsibility or participation in race relations from themselves, which is problematic, as it further encourages individualistic,

rather than systemic, understandings of racism (Shome, 2000; DiTomaso, Parks-Yancy & Post, 2003). Many white Americans' individualistic beliefs allow them to reconcile their own achievements in life, but do not place them in a social context in which their group benefits at the hands of other marginalized groups (Shome, 2000).

Other scholars note more specific rhetorical techniques used to deflect responsibility from white people. By naming whiteness, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) seek to "displace its centrality and reveal its invisible position" (p. 292). The researchers draw their data from everyday, popular culture rhetoric, identifying six strategies that people use when discussing or explaining whiteness. The first links "white" with "power" in what the authors refer to as a "crude" or "naked" manner. The second uses whiteness to describe a lack of any other defining racial or ethnic features; it invokes a rhetoric of universality and invisibility. The third strategy removes whiteness from its social and historical contexts, and asserts that it is a scientific or factual description of a person. These claims of scientific explanation privilege "reason, objectivity and masculinity" and hide the contradictions present in whiteness (p. 300). The fourth rhetorical strategy conflates race and nationality; those invoking this rhetoric confuse whiteness with being "American," or claim whiteness as their nationality. Nakayama and Krizek describe this conflation as an expression of power, in that those who are not white are relegated to a non-mainstream role in "national life" (p. 301). A fifth strategy is refusal to label oneself as part of any particular group, or in any way more narrow than "American." Such

rhetoric is reflective of an ideology of individualism and ignores social construction of identity. The final strategic rhetoric used is talking about one's whiteness in relation to European ancestry or ethnicity. Although this response does acknowledge some aspect of historical and social context, those using this rhetoric still do not acknowledge any power relations in their answers. Nakayama and Krizek, like others, note that there are contradictions present in these discourses, and that some of them almost directly oppose others; as they conclude, "whiteness is complex and problematic" (p. 303).

In their own experiences teaching, other scholars similarly discuss strategies that people use to "disengage" from analyzing whiteness and race more generally (Yep, 2007; Cooks, 2007; Simpson, 2007; Moon, 1999). Simpson notes three such practices of performing whiteness (within the classroom). They are: erasing or neutralizing race, fearing conflict or disagreement with others, and an invalidation of any "emotional" comments made by others. Yep recognizes six further strategies, including silence, denial that racism is still a problem in the US, accusations of racism towards non-white groups, calling non-white people simply "angry," seeing issues of race on individualistic rather than systemic levels, and recognition of the current state of racial problems in the US, but without any interest in moving forward. As Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2005) state in their work on critical race theory, "Our typical response to inequity is to feel sorry for the individuals but ignore the structure that produces such inequity" (p. 290). These strategies

work together to both avoid and shut down discussions and analyses of whiteness (Yep, 2007).

White students often suspect people coming from “marginal social locations in Eurocentric heteropatriarchal culture” as “having an agenda,” while others in the center of the culture (ie. white men) are not suspected of the same (Yep, 2007, p. 95). Those speaking from positions of privilege are assumed to be objective, read: truthful. On the other hand, those speaking from marginalized positions are assumed to have personal interests, which are equated with biases and therefore not “true”. Different power dynamics are associated with different social positions. Cooks (2007) discusses such power dynamics in ethnic joke telling through a performative approach. The reporting of racist jokes often reinforces individualized understandings of racism and blurs structural ones. White students point out internalized racism when people of color tell jokes about their own groups, or point to “reverse discrimination” when non-white people tell jokes about whites (p. 235). When non-white people tell jokes about non-white people, white people may also take this as confirmation of stereotypes about these groups. Ginger jokes, which call into question both popular understandings of both race and reverse racism, are interesting to consider within this framework.

Moon (1999) further discusses the process of whiteness appearing in everyday talk and asks, “how does one get to be (and remain) white?” (p. 178). Whites learn both the penalties and rewards for how they react in situations when racism is involved. They are penalized for “racial betrayal” if they speak up, and they are rewarded for keeping

silent (p. 184). Another aspect of “Whitespeak” is historical use of euphemisms in the US in regards to racialized issues, such as affirmative action, immigration, or welfare (p. 187). Three linguistic techniques are used to express perceived “white racism”: the first is subjectifying racism, wherein the speaker “bestows agency on race and racism” and allows white people to separate themselves from any involvement in race relations; the second technique is use of passive voice, whereby white people historically erase any agents of racism, and again distance themselves from any accountability in present day racial relations; the third technique is disembodiment. In this technique, anonymous agents, “they,” are the ones responsible for perpetuating racism. Naming white people as a group in particular as responsible for racism is against the rules of Whitespeak.

Moon also implicates “hyperpoliteness” in her discussion of Whitespeak (p. 192).

Hyperpoliteness, somewhat akin to “political correctness” silences expression of particular ideas, but does not challenge, and may even reinforce, beliefs or perceptions (p. 193). Hyperpoliteness also contributes to the idea that even talking about or noticing race is inappropriate. Simpson similarly explains that because many of her students have learned that talking about race is inappropriate, they understand any attention to racial differences as “wrong” (p. 257). Participants in her classroom experienced fear of conflict and discomfort when the subject of race came up in the classroom. It is important to consider if and to what degree these practices carry over into the anonymous sphere of the internet.

Claiming European heritage as “other”

Discourses about denying whiteness often align with narratives of historical victimization based on European ancestry (Simpson, 2007). Family histories and narratives detailing unpleasant and hostile experiences for European immigrants are popular in the United States. However, there is an often-unrecognized danger to the perpetuation of these narratives. Like many scholars argue, belief in these stories helps to solidify people’s belief in the “American Dream.” Furthermore, these narratives serve to reinforce stereotypes about nonwhite immigrants or people of color in lower socioeconomic situations today. Perpetuation of these narratives leads to a “if my ancestors could do it, why can’t “they”?” mentality, which denies the implicit privileges that many white European immigrants already had upon arrival to the United States, despite other types of discrimination they may have faced.

Dyer (1997) particularly acknowledges the importance of cultural and physical context when discussing Irish people’s whiteness in the nineteenth century. In England during the mid to late nineteenth century there existed an exploitative, post-colonial relationship between the British and Irish. In America during the same time period, although the Irish were of a poor immigrant class, they were regarded as superior to Native Americans, African Americans, and later, newly arriving groups of Southern and Eastern European immigrants. Considering the translation of gingerism from England to America within these two separate historical contexts further complicates the phenomenon.

Ignatiev (1995) argues for an understanding of whiteness as fluid and constructed in his work on the “whitening” of Irish immigrants in the US. Upon arriving in the US, Irish Catholics had an “ambiguous” racial status. Several scholars note both anecdotal and documented instances of amicable black and Irish relationships in the mid-1800s, as well as racial slurs that associate the two groups (Dolan, 2008; Ignatiev, 1995; Jacobson, 1995). One of the key ways in which the Irish “became white” was to distance themselves from African Americans and align themselves with the Democratic party, which at the time included pro-slavery beliefs in its platform. Other processes which aided the “whitening” of the Irish included the birth of a new generation of American-born citizens of Irish descent, and the arrival of new European immigrant groups (such as the Italians) who took the Irish’s place as the “lowest” ranking immigrant group (Dolan, 2008, p. 104).

Guglielmo (2003) contests Ignatiev’s assertions that some European immigrants “became white” only after a lengthy period of both time and struggle. He argues that many groups of immigrants arriving in the US during the period of mass immigration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were “already white” when they arrived. For example, Italians were received as white by major social institutions, such as the US census, naturalization laws, realtors, and others. Italian immigrants were still subject to racial prejudice and discrimination in some areas of social life, but such discrimination did not negate their perceived whiteness in many institutions. New immigrants to the US

were racialized, but in an “in-between” way, in which they were neither viewed as stably white, nor as completely non-white (Roediger, 2005, p. 12).

Like Guglielmo, Jensen (2002) argues against popular understandings of European immigrant life in the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries. In his case study of the NINA (No Irish Need Apply) sign, he argues that popularity of such signs is a myth that exists within the Irish diaspora’s imagination. Further, according to job market records, there is evidence that Irish men were in fact not discriminated against for employment and that sometimes jobs were even created specifically for them during the late 1800s. The NINA myth aided “ethnic solidarity” amongst Irish people and cultivated feelings of received discrimination and prejudice from other Americans. Jacobson (1995) extends this argument to other European immigrant groups, focusing not only on the Irish, but Polish and Jewish groups, as well. Collective emigration and living situations encouraged feelings of “injury and displacement” across ethnic groups (p. 2). Strong feelings of nationalism and shared experiences in “Old World struggles” also contributed to ethnic group solidarity (p. 10). Jacobson (1998) details the history of naturalization, citizenship laws and immigration law, as well as “scientific” classifications of race, in order to argue that race is politically and culturally constructed.

Roediger (2005), however, argues that Jacobson (1998) focuses too much on “expert” or official sites for racial transformation, such as courts, academic spaces, and published cultural artifacts. He advocates for the importance of studying the everyday,

popular culture occurrences and communications that helped people understand race in different ways, within the context of immigration (p. 8). More recent work seeks to bring these themes into everyday discussions of race and whiteness, generally (Warren & Fassett, 2004). In today's society, the internet represents one place where discourses on issues of popular culture, that are significantly both informal *and* documented, occur.

Identifying oneself or one's ancestors as "ethnic" serves dual purposes; first, it allows white people to negate the privilege they experience in today's society (Jacobson, 1998), and secondly, it confirms belief in the "American Dream" and may lead people to deny government welfare programs, if they believe that their ancestors "made it" in America without anyone's help (Gallagher, 2003, p. 146). These ideas work alongside Myers's concept of "white fright" and perpetuate discourses of reverse discrimination.

In the past decade, there have been several cases of alleged reverse discrimination brought to various levels of court. In *Fisher v. The University of Texas* (2009), a white female applicant to the University of Texas at Austin sued the university for violation of her 14th amendment rights, arguing that minority applicants with lesser credentials were granted admission to the university over her. She asked that the university's use of race as a factor in the admissions process be deemed unconstitutional, according to the Equal Protection Clause. After the US District Court upheld two earlier affirmative action case decisions (*Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003)), in which it was

ruled that affirmative action is constitutional, but that quota systems based on race are not) the case was appealed to the 5th Circuit Court, which ruled in the same way. In 2012, the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case (Santoro & Worth, 2012). In June of 2013, the Supreme Court ruled that the Court of Appeals should re-evaluate the case, arguing that the scrutiny of analysis of race in the University of Texas's admissions process case was not as strong as it had been in the previous cases (*Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, 2013). Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg was the only dissenter, arguing that the Appeal's Court's first ruling was enough. At this time, the final case has not yet been heard.

Coincidentally, Fisher has red hair, and within social media, has been repeatedly called "dumb" and "ugly," fitting the typical stereotypes associated with gingers. Her case has even inspired satirical articles that reframe it as an "Anti-Ginger" lawsuit (ie. Bishop, 2012). Such satire uses the category of ginger as a stand in for any non-white group, in the same way as the *South Park* episode that many allege is responsible for anti-ginger sentiment within the US.

Decentered white masculinity

Andersen (2003) and others (ie. Myers, 2003) argue that policies such as affirmative action have created feelings of uncertainty and fear among some groups of white people. Although the highly-publicized *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* case featured a woman as the plaintiff, scholars argue that white, middle class, heterosexual men may be particularly affected by fears of uncertainty, as their once unacknowledged privilege is decentered (Wellman, 1997; Andersen, 2003). Perceived threats to privileges

and positions of power again lead to discourses of reverse racism and ancestral victimization or discrimination. White middle class masculinity has experienced a “crisis” in recent years (Robinson, 2000; Malin, 2005; Kimmel, 2006); the effects of this crisis have been multiple and contradictory. When whiteness and maleness are decentered and questioned, the response from white men tends to be a backlash towards those they perceive are “attacking” them.

Kimmel (2006) details the history of the crisis of white masculinity. In the 1980s, along with the backlash against feminism came advocates for “men’s rights.” Men’s rights activists argued that gender equality had been achieved and that further special treatment for women could be considered discrimination against men. In response to fears about loss of white men’s power, attacks against non-white immigrants, African Americans, gay men, and women were rampant in popular culture. As Kimmel explains, “the politics of resentment and retaliation” is a tendency of white middle and working class masculinity (p. 214).

Beginning at the turn of the 21st century, there was a cultural shift towards male anger, rather than anxiety over white men’s perceived loss of stature (Kimmel, 2006). Advances in gender and racial equality were interpreted as a loss of power and control for some white men. Men clung to outdated ideals of manhood such as the “self-made,” traditionally masculine, middle class man, whose status was guaranteed by hard work.

Although these ideals are even less attainable in today's increasingly rich/poor dichotomous society, many men still aspire to them. When they do not achieve these goals, anger at "others" is often directed towards individual groups of non-white males. In fact, in white supremacist groups, racism, homophobia and nativism are often connected with ideas of masculinity. Members of such groups see themselves as "besieged white men" whose aim it is to protect traditional families and masculinities (Kimmel, 2006, p. 229). White men, although still in control of much of the world, feel like victims.

Two of the many ways in which masculinity involves power are men's power over women, and some men's power over other men (Kimmel, 2005). Non-white, non-Protestant males have historically been portrayed as either "too masculine," or "too effeminate" (Kimmel, 2006, p. 230). However, the hypermasculinity that was once reserved to make non-white men look overly angry and dangerous has now moved into a more central role in our culture, as violence, strength and masculinity are synonymous. Traditionally, black men in the US have been stereotyped as physically strong but intellectually inept. They have also been viewed as hypersexual, in ways both threatening to white women, and anxiety producing for white men (Marable, 2008). Similarly, men of Hispanic or Latino origin are often stereotyped as dominant, aggressive, and as portraying "exaggerated male behavior" (Baca Zinn, 2008, p. 26). The idea that binary gender roles are more rigid in Latino than white cultures is also a

common assumption (Baca Zinn, 2008). Although these characteristics are viewed negatively in some contexts, they are also viewed as hypermasculine ideals in others. As Yousman (2003) states, “one clear trend in the history of American popular culture is ‘Black = cool’” (p. 369). White male (especially youth) culture today seeks and throughout the 20th century has sought to appropriate some of these “cool” aspects both performed by and stereotyped as masculinities of color. This appropriation of some aspects of blackness in popular culture, however, does not indicate any desire to participate in progressive social movements, or struggle for racial equality. Rather, it demonstrates the privilege of performing blackness without living it.

One group that has been historically portrayed in an opposite manner to black and Latino men are Jewish men. Qualities of the “Jewish nerd” include being “quasi-intellectual,” wearing glasses, acting “mouselike,” or “inept, timid, and cowardly” (Brod, 2008, p. 47). Popular culture depictions of Jewish men often portray them as powerless. Brod argues that in the U.S. context, powerless equals effeminate, and effeminate equals homosexual. Sexual incompetence is another popular stereotype of the Jewish man (Brod, 2008). Men seen as “less than real men” in any way are perceived as potentially threatening to the security of our nation (Kimmel, 2008).

The cultural image of the male ginger most closely resembles the stereotype of the Jewish nerd. Although red hair is often conflated with Irishness, there are several other ethnic groups across the world that share red haired genes (Best & Heckert, 1997, p.

373). Old data cites that out of a sample population of Jewish people living in New York in the early 1900s, 2.53% of Jewish men and 3.69% of Jewish women had red hair, significantly higher than the city's average (Fishberg, 1903, p.92).

In the case of memes and viral videos (two of the most popular ways that the ginger phenomenon has spread), subjects are rarely labeled as explicitly Irish; yet in comments in response to these images, people often assume the subjects to be Irish. (Assumed Irishness is one stereotype of redheads (Best & Heckert, 1997)). Again, here is a complication of United States popular culture appropriating the ginger phenomenon from England. With England's colonial and exploitative history with Ireland, it is possible to understand contempt for and prejudice against those who look like stereotypical Irish people. The US, however, does not have this same history. Although in popular historical narratives the mistreatment and poverty of Irish immigrants to the US is a well-told tale, Irishness is one of the most claimed, "preferred" ethnicities (Hout & Goldstein, 1994). On the other hand, some memes and other popular cultural images of gingers are tied to their Jewishness (for example, Aaron Mishkin, a student interviewed and subsequently turned into a meme after "Kick a Ginger Day;" the Goldman family from *Family Guy*). In fact, in the original *South Park* episode, red-haired Jewish people are given a category separate from gingers; the Jewish character, Kyle Broflovski, is referred to as a "daywalker," or a red haired person without pale skin or freckles. Terms such as "Ginger Jews" and "Jewfro" are also popular online. Although some internet users recognize the appearance

of red hair in many ethnicities and cultures, it appears that overall there is a tendency to assume a ginger is Irish, even when codes such as name, skin tones, etc. may indicate otherwise. Some historians, such as Matthew Frye Jacobson, draw similarities between the Irish and Jewish experience of isolation and poverty in immigrating to the United States. However, the most compelling link between the two groups is Kimmel's notion of being perceived as "less than real men" (2008).

During the transition from male anxiety to anger in the 1990s, alternative depictions of manhood, or "wimps" were attacked within popular culture (Kimmel, 2006, p. 193). Today, in some ways, the opposite is true, but it is a particular kind of alternative manhood (ie. stylized, commercialized, but pretends to be authentic), that is accepted. It is as though in response to not being able to be as "cool" as men of color, some white men have bought into the idea of purchasing a "wimpy," but commercially legitimized manhood (for example, metrosexuals, geek culture, hipster culture, "Stuff White People Like"). However, the actual, non-stylized, grotesque, contemptible nerd still exists (ie., the ginger). In his hyperwhite form, he represents white men's fear that this is how they are perceived, and as such, is ostracized, and attacked within popular culture.

Since its arguable arrival in the US in 2005, the term "ginger" has become a popular joke. At the same time, however, isolated serious incidents of violence towards red-haired people and potentially dangerous scientific discourses surrounding the "ginger

gene” suggest that there is something deeper to consider than just lighthearted teasing.

Gingerism as a social phenomenon comments upon the current state of and fears surrounding white masculinity in US culture. This study attempts to explore this phenomenon and ask how public response to gingerism offers insight into current popular culture understandings of race and racism, as well as what it can tell us about changing notions of white masculinities in US culture today.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

To further analyze the cultural perception of gingerism, I performed a discourse analysis of conversations about gingerism online. By discourse analysis, I mean that I analyzed multiple sites of online conversation about the gingerism phenomenon in order to better understand the historical and cultural contexts that make this kind of phenomenon possible. Following Saukko's warning that postmodern texts often do not represent reality, but self-reflexively refer to other images and texts and offer sites of contestation over meaning, I looked to locate these conversations in broader cultural contexts of which they are a part (p. 100). The analysis focused on comments in response to various Internet texts about gingerism, including mainstream news articles, blog posts, viral videos and public forums. This study is not concerned primarily with the ways in which these ideas have spread over the Internet, but rather looks to these multiple Internet texts as rich sites where conversations about the topics of interest take place. Internet comments are an appropriate place to look for people's opinions, because the gingerism phenomenon has largely spread over the Internet. Many studies in communication have been completed which successfully utilize online discourse as their primary data (Aharony, 2010). Sterne (1999) describes how researchers looking to study the Internet should understand the Internet as a potential site from which to investigate more complex cultural or political problems. Mitra and Cohen (1999) add that discourse analysis can be a particularly appropriate method for connecting discourse found in Internet texts to larger social issues.

Of course the online community is restricted by many factors and likely over-represents certain demographics. Porter and Donthu (2006) explain that although most Americans are now using the internet, young, white, wealthy, highly educated people still have higher use rates when compared to their older, non-white, less wealthy and less educated counterparts. In addition, gender, race and age all influence how likely a person is to participate in online communities. Research has also shown that women may experience online forums and dialogues as hostile, perhaps influencing their desire or likelihood to participate in such conversations. On the other hand, however, Mann and Stewart (2000) suggest that CMC may also erase some social cues that typically decide power relations in face-to-face interactions. Most commenters on the types of Internet texts I plan to look at do not identify their social backgrounds or identities within their comments, so it is not possible to attribute them to specific groups, unless they explicitly self-identify themselves as such. However, in the absence of direct identification, many people will ascribe an identity to other commenters (ie. racial, gendered, ethnic, etc.) based solely on textual clues.

The beliefs and opinions expressed in these online discourses are not necessarily reflective of the entire popular culture at large. However, as Denzin (1999) describes in his work on cybertalk,

Any given practice that is studied is significant because it is an instance of a cultural practice that happened in a particular time and place. This practice cannot be generalized to other practices; its importance is that it instantiates a cultural practice, a cultural performance (storytelling), and a set of shifting, conflicting cultural messages (p. 112).

In addition, Denzin describes the goal of an analysis of multiple “messy texts” as achieving a deep understanding of particular instances or experiences. He also rejects the idea of generalizing the findings of such an analysis of to a “normal population,” arguing that such a focus ignores the “processes that produce an instance in the first place” (1999, p. 112-3). I argue that this phenomenon’s popularity on the Internet at this particular point in time makes it an important cultural phenomenon to investigate. Furthermore, the cultural responses and online text production that it has inspired indicate that responses to gingerism do represent some, not all, popular culture understandings of race and racism, in what has been termed a “post-racial era.” Because of the expansive nature of the internet, texts are inherently multiple and messy; the same, repeated text may be found in different places with different sets of comments, comments and responses may be unreadable or off-topic, and it is virtually impossible to collect every online conversation about this particular phenomenon. Although these data may not be generalizable to other cultures or historical moments, they still offer valuable information about a particular, significant cultural phenomenon at this point in time.

Sampling

The main focus of my analysis is reader comments in response to multiple Internet texts, although at times the content of the main texts themselves become important, and I analyze those discourses, as well. When looking at multiple multimedia texts, the question of where to begin the analysis is important. According to Mitra and Cohen (1999), the “best connected” or linked texts are good starting points due to the

intertextuality of the Internet; the those sites which offer the most links to other sites of interest, or have been most cited by other sites are likely to lead to more sources of interest (p. 192-3). I began analysis with the site Gingerism.com, a blog which links to news articles, blog posts, viral videos, memes, and other media coverage of instances of gingerism. Entries on the Gingerism.com blog itself do not usually have many comments useful for analysis, but do link to news coverage or the texts of original instances of gingerism, where commenting is popular. These sites then link to or point out subsequent examples. I also subscribed to several ginger-related interest groups online, which alerted me to news articles and viral videos on related topics. I gathered 102 sites of interest and 6,413 comments, but am aware that for each one collected, there are many more that could be added to give a more inclusive view of the discourse around gingerism. Methodologically similar studies have analyzed a few hundred to over several thousand comments and have stopped when themes were fully saturated (Aharony, 2010; Nochi, 1998; Winzelberg, 1997). Not all comments on these sites refer to the questions I seek to answer; comments that were completely off topic were not analyzed. I grouped the remaining comments into the sections represented in each chapter of analysis and chose representative comments to quote.

As Mitra and Cohen (1999) explain, when performing Internet research, the problem of “innumerable texts” can arise. It will not be possible to find every single site that features comments discussing gingerism, but I will aim to focus on texts that offer the most substantial conversations or threads. The authors also point out that selecting across multiple genres of texts (in this case memes, blogs, news articles, etc.) can help to make an analysis more comprehensive. They conclude that, “the quantity of texts

analyzed is less critical than careful examination of a selection of texts that address various components of the issue being researched” (p. 194-5). I will seek to focus on texts that most directly answer my research questions.

Risks and limitations

Limitations associated with analyzing CMC include loss of context of speech, participants not responding directly to one another, or time lapses in conversation that make it difficult to follow or encourage continued dialogue (Mitra & Cohen, 1999; Mann & Stewart, 2000). Although individual comments do appear out of context in some threads I located, it is possible to follow the conversations in a logical manner in majority of situations, especially with new discussion technology that allows readers to respond directly to one another, creating smaller threads within large comment forums. Scholars also note the risks of active deception on behalf of participants, leading to inauthenticity of data (Mitra & Cohen, 1999). For the purposes of my study, this was not a problem, as I did not engage in dialogue with the commenters, and dialogues were completed by the time I read them.

CHAPTER 3

“IS GINGERISM AS BAD AS RACISM?”¹

With an increase in media coverage of prejudice against redheaded people, conversations about the severity of the discrimination have become more common. Comments sections on news articles, blogs, and viral videos, in addition to question and answer threads, are all sites in which these conversations take place. The following analysis considers such forums. First, I will explore the varied definitions people use to make sense of the word “racism,” and suggest why some of these lead to particular viewpoints regarding gingerism. Next, I will focus on the concept of the “double standard,” a reasoning device people use to argue that reverse racism exists today. Third, I will look at people’s justifications for calling gingerism racism with particular regard to histories of Irish and Scottish oppressions within Great Britain and the United States. Finally, I will explore the conversations that take place when people enter into the conversation and disrupt these popular narratives, attempting to complicate the discussion and definitions of racism as they are happening within these forums, and consider how others engage with them.

Definitions of racism

Although people often speak from their own individual experiences when engaging in these types of online conversations, there are several shared definitions of racism commenters utilize when talking about gingerism. The first way many people

¹ Title taken from Finlo Rorher, “Is gingerism as bad as racism?” *BBC News UK*, June 6, 2007. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/6725653.stm

attempt to define racism is as prejudice based literally on skin color, devoid of any context. For example, one other commenter says that racism is “calling someone names because of a colour.” Similarly, one person argues, “Caucasian is a race, and redheads are a sub-race of that. So it IS racism – and anyway the principle [sic] is the same, i.e. hating a group’s color.” Another variation is that race is “a hereditary appearance or color among a group” and that gingerism is “race-ISM because of the hate directed towards it [red haired people].” Bonilla Silva (1997) argues that defining racism solely as a “set of ideas or beliefs” is an idealist view that reduces racism to a psychological phenomenon that happens on an individual level. He argues that the term racism should not be used to describe all racial phenomena that take place within a culture, but rather, racism should be conceptualized as one part of a racialized social system, in which economic, ideological and political systems are at least partially structured by “the placement of actors in racial categories or races” (p. 469). Placing people into such categories creates hierarchies, which then determine the social relationships between people in these racial categories. Therefore, conceptualizing racism as the belief that a particular skin color is better than another misses much of the broader context of how race functions in society.

Even further, because in these definitions race is defined literally as only skin color, people often simply replace the word “skin” with “hair” and see these as equivalent

prejudices. For example, one person asks, "Why is it acceptable to discriminate someone because of the colour of their hair, but not the colour of their skin? Even at a time when people say political correctness has gone too far, why are gingers not protected by this?"

Any act of discrimination comes to stand-in for racism. Again, understanding racism as a set of beliefs, rather than part of a much more complex social system allows some people to make this comparison and not find it problematic or offensive.

There are, however, within conversations about gingerism, some comments that express what could be called "racist" views, if one adhered to the definition of racism as discrimination or hatred against a particular skin color. Some people outwardly express disgust for the very pale skin color and freckles typically associated with red hair. For example,

I'm ashamed to admit it but I've never liked Red-heads. Yet the fact is it's not actually their hair-color that puts me off...! No, its that coarse, whiter-than-white skin (sometimes almost translucent!) which it invariably signifies. Even if I spot a red-head at a hundred yards, I'll make pretty sure my eyes don't linger on their face or arms if I can help it. And worse, of course - if it's a hot day on the beach - inside 5 minutes they turn a painful looking shade of dappled lobster. Believe me, up-close-and-personal with a "bluey" - as Australians call them - is not for me...!!!

Commenters seeking to affirm the seriousness of gingerism point to comments such as these as examples of racism. What is not recognized by responders is that a personal or

aesthetic distaste towards a particular physical attribute is not indicative of any systemic prejudice or discrimination.

Another set of people attempts to define racism through its connections to genetics, in particular using the etymologies of the word “genocide” and “genes.” As one person says, “race is determined by genes – as in ‘genocide.’ And [gingerism] is discrimination just like hate on any other color...” Because of recent press surrounding the science of red hair and gingeriness as a recessive trait (which will be discussed further in the next chapter), many people discuss the issue in a scientific, or pseudo-scientific context. The use of the terms genocide and eugenics in this context will be discussed in more detail in the chapter on the MC1R DNA test. However, the main function of highlighting the genetic component of gingeriness is to secure gingers as a biologically “different” group, and thus offer justification for the fact that they should be given some type of special protections. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) explain that one rhetorical strategy used to deny white privilege is to say that whiteness is merely a scientific description of a person; in this case, people interpret recent genetic science to mean that gingers are not in fact biologically different from other white people. Research has found that lay white Americans often endorse genetic theories to explain supposed differences in racial characteristics between groups, even though scientists do not widely support these theories (Jayaratne, et al., 2006). The authors of this study propose that this phenomenon may be influenced by the amount of positive attention US media give to stories about genetics. The data presented in the following chapter suggests that media

coverage of genetic advancements in the UK also leads to public engagement with and potentially incorrect interpretation of genetic science, though the coverage presented is not necessarily positive in nature.

A third definition of racism does reference something broader than just “color” or “genetics,” but does so in a way that undermines historical and structural aspects of racism. One person defines racism for his or her fellow readers as “pathetic guilt brainwashing for crap that happened in the past.” Attempting to deny the history behind racism by pointing to a so-called double standard or hypocrisy is a common rhetorical move. For instance,

I get SO sick of the hypocrites who rationalize double-standards saying “it’s not the same as anti-semitism [sic] or racism because redheads didn’t have slavery or the holocaust blah blah blah” etc. A hate-crime happens to YOU, not your goddamned ancestors!

In this case an individual hate crime is compared with racism, again showing a lack of understanding or acceptance of the structural and systemic aspects of society that sustain racism. As Bonilla-Silva (1997) explains, in addition to being individualized, racism is also often conceptualized as “overt behavior,” such as hate crimes (p. 468). Such denial of structural factors and the historical importance of racism lead to claims of reverse racism and justifications of gingerism as a form of racism.

A hypocritical double standard

As in the previous example, the terms “hypocrisy” and “double standard” are used often by those seeking to express frustration or outrage over the fact that gingerism exists and is not considered serious by everyone. These people additionally often make claims that gingerism is either equal in harm to, or is in itself a form of racism. Most commenters equating gingerism and racism do not understand racism as systemic, viewing it only as preferential treatment of or discrimination against a particular skin color or in some cases even nationality. In fact, race is often conflated with nationality in these contexts. For instance one person states,

Gingers get so much abuse and it’s just accepted. It’s another example of being acceptable to mock white people and not seen as racism. Take for example a group of Chinese people are mocking a ginger haired lad for the colour of his hair (which only white europeans [sic] have) and then he turned around and called them slanty eyed freaks (which slanty eyes are associated with east asians [sic]) the ginger haired lad would be seen as racist where the asians [sic] wouldn’t.

Across multiple sites, this practice is referred to as a “typical double standard.” Again, in this context we see that hair color is simply swapped out for another physical characteristic and a comparison is made between two forms of so-called discrimination, without attention given to historical, structural, or social context. In this comment, there is no recognition of the relative power of the social groups named (ie. white Europeans versus Asians). Another person argues that:

The double-standards show that it's not about right and wrong, just popularity – i.e. they love and hate according to whether it's popular to do so – and they make up REASONS for it later. Blacks? Slavery and the KKK. Jews? Holocaust. Asians, Indians and Arabs? 'Tolerance.'...it's just one big popularity-contest, with a bunch of rationalizations to brazen it out.

These comments express sentiments of reverse racism and some people in the comments explicitly call gingerism a form of "reverse prejudice." Norton and Sommers (2011) describe white Americans' views of race as a "zero-sum game," meaning that so-called special privileges for and advancements made by black and other non-white people indicate that white people must be losing something. Reverse racism is conceptualized as the idea that as anti-black discrimination has decreased (in the imagination of white America), anti-white discrimination has to have increased. Commenters expressing concerns over reverse racism on these forums further argue that such so-called double standards "only [give] bigots a license to oppress the unprotected" – such as gingers. Some argue that white people are not given special protections thanks to historical "reasons" such as slavery, the KKK, or the Holocaust, and are thus particularly susceptible to being discriminated against; gingerism is then proposed as the result of white people not having legal protections when other vulnerable racial groups do. As

Moon (1999) suggests, white people often partake in linguistic strategies to deny relationships to any historical agents responsible for racism. Several people go so far as to insinuate that it is potentially worse to take part in anti-ginger behaviors than other, more recognized forms of discrimination. For example, one person writes,

Its [sic] no more acceptable to victimize someone because they are Black or Gay. Someone can no more control being ginger than being black or gay. To attack a target cos [sic] its soft and because you wont [sic] be branded a social outcast is very cowardly. Id [sic] have more respect for someone who was racist and homophobic than a coward even tho [sic] its wrong. At least they have balls.

Another person who self-identifies as a ginger explains,

Unfortunately the main instigators of this abuse tend to be whites themselves, who in my opinion haven't the balls to say something "racist" about non whites so they wimp out and pick on their own race instead.

These comments express the belief that it is somehow "brave" to express racist views about non-white people. The society in which these statements are considered radical is the same one in which so-called "political correctness" has created a world in which white people are now viewed as oppressed.

Irish and Scottish as oppressed groups

Some commenters, in an attempt to justify either reverse racism or gingerism as a legitimate problem, do try to explain historical "reasons" that legitimate discrimination against white people. Along with belittling and undermining the histories of slavery and

the Holocaust, commenters arguing that gingerism is racism also assert that Irish and Scottish immigrants to both England and the United States share tragic pasts and histories of oppression. As Best and Heckertt (1997) argue, people often equate Irishness or Scottishness with red hair. Thus, these commenters say that gingerism is akin to being anti-Irish or anti-Scottish, while arguing that members of these groups constitute the “Celtic race.” Others claim that in the UK, the Irish are an oppressed group while the English are the “privileged” group, but the terms privilege or oppression are not defined. Still, others claim that the prejudice is rooted in anti-Catholicism.

Many with self-identified Scottish or Irish heritage argue that the British are an inherently racist or discriminatory group. For example, one person argues, “The Brits are the most racist, low standard people on the planet and I couldn't care less what they think of me or any other redhead.” For those living in the Great Britain, and even more particularly in Northern Ireland, the sense of Irish oppression by the British is not only historical, but potentially experienced day to day, due to holdover from the violent conflicts between Irish nationalists and UK Unionists over the status of Northern Ireland as part of and subject to rule by the UK. Recent Scottish nationalist and separatist movements have expressed similar sentiments (Connell, 2004).

Throughout analysis of this entire project, one of the most popularly referenced media examples of gingerism is the 2010 M.I.A. music video, “Born Free,” in which young redheaded, freckled men are violently rounded up, transported to a mine field and forced to run through mines while military officers shoot at them. The video (like the

infamous *South Park* episode) was arguably created as social commentary on political and racial issues. However, it was heavily critiqued by some for its explicit portrayals of violence and was even banned from Youtube (Herrera, 2010). Although the video has been widely critically interpreted, because it involves redheads, some take it as an example of gingerism, rather than a wider metaphor. For example, one person explains, “Hatred of gingers could be considered racism against the indigenous people of the British Isles and other Celtic peoples. Saxons and others who've come to these Isles have always hated gingers.” Similarly, some people employ the term “soft-racism” to express the anti-Irish prejudice that “often lurks in the air, barely spoken,” in the UK. Others go so far as to argue that societal institutions, including the police and school systems, are complicit in sustaining so-called racism towards red haired people. One commenter writes that,

most people think that beating up a redhead for being redhaired is just teasing, while beating up a black kid for being black is racism – so redheaded children in non-Irish parts of the UK are not only bullied and discriminated against, the teachers and adults and even police are complicit.

In the UK context, many people make the argument that the Irish are still an oppressed group as compared to the English, because of the historical colonial relationship between the two. In the case of the US, stories of Irish immigrant oppression are deeply ingrained in some people’s family histories. Young (1990) describes cultural

imperialism as one way in which a group can be oppressed. She argues that “to experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspectives of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the other” (p. 59). There is much evidence to support this idea in terms of the Irish immigrant experience both to the UK and the US. However, as Young also argues, differences between social groups often “entail privilege and oppression for the same person in different respects (p. 42). Although documented prejudice exists against these groups in terms of housing and other areas of society, the extent to which Irish immigrants to the US in particular were systematically discriminated in any way based on skin color against in the late 1800s is contested amongst scholars (Jensen, 2002). The fact that one way in which the Irish “became white” was by supporting the pro-slavery Democratic Party speaks to Young’s (1990) argument that privilege and oppression may function simultaneously within a particular social group (Ignatiev, 1995). Irish immigrant oppression based on class, religion, and national origin does not negate the white racial privilege they may have had.

However, many scholars have suggested that identifying with narratives of European immigrant victimization in the US often leads to modern day denial of white privilege (Gallagher, 2003; Jacobson, 1995; Simpson, 2007). White people growing up in the United States are often familiar with the hardships their European immigrant ancestors faced upon first arriving in the US. This type of commentary is especially

common amongst those of Irish ancestry. In fact, in other online satirical or more critical sites that discuss white privilege, phrases such as “the Irish faced oppression, too” are a common joke.

Jacobson (1995) suggests that adhering to dramatized narratives about struggles faced by immigrant groups contributed to ethnic group solidarity and served a practical function in what were difficult collective living situations. Again, Dyer (1997) argues, the histories surrounding Irish and Scottish immigration to the UK versus the US create entirely different social contexts. Because of this, it becomes complicated to make comparisons across these two geographical locations, considering whether immigration history could function as a legitimizing factor for the seriousness of gingerism as a form of ethnic prejudice.

Confrontations and disagreements

Although many people enter into these conversations to exclaim that gingerism is “the new racism,” or the “last acceptable prejudice,” (two terms often used by commenters) some people take these forums as opportunities to engage in more critical discussions of race and racism. One person responds to the direct question of “is gingerism as bad as racism?” with a possible explanation for why it is not productive to simply reduce racism to skin color prejudice, and then equate that to hair color prejudice. This commenter answers,

Perhaps because racism has a more cruel history with all the discrimination [sic] that has gone on over the decades, where as gingerism

hasn't really been an issue. Also, maybe because hair colour can be changed whilst skin colour can't (opening for a Michael Jackson joke)...and many have this view of not discriminating [sic] over something that isn't in somebody's control e.g. skin colour, disabilities etc.

In this comment, there is some acknowledgement of history as important in considering racism. However, the commenter fails to further explain why gingerism is not comparable to racism, other than mentioning that red haired people haven't been exposed to a "cruel history." The "real" reason given for disagreeing with the proposed idea that gingerism is racism is because one can decide to change one's hair color; or in other words, it is something over which one has control. Many others recognize there is something problematic about calling gingerism racism, but also base their reasoning on the fact that racism is due to something inherent about skin color, that does not exist in the same way for hair color. For example, "You must be absolute dick head to compare racism with gingerism. I assure you racism is more unacceptable than gingerism...gingers can dye their hairs easily while you can't dye your skin overnight."

This type of reasoning receives some response from fellow commenters, such as questions of why someone should be expected to dye her/his hair to avoid discrimination, or that it is in fact not easy to dye red hair, as compared with other hair colors. Still, these types of comments do not promote further critical engagement beyond recognizing a

difference between skin and hair color, nor do they invite additional reasons why the comparison between gingerism and racism may be problematic.

There are, however, some commenters that do attempt to bring a wider historical and structural perspective into the conversation. One person says in response to a claim that gingerism is “as bad” as racism, “As far as I’m aware, there is no history of a ginger-haired-people slave trade.” However, no one agrees with or engages with this response in a way that moves the conversation forward. The only types of replies that this commenter receives are further justifications that red haired people have in fact faced equal discrimination to that of non-white people. For example, one person writes, “If you look back in history gingerism existed; people were hanged and accused of witchcraft because of being ginger. People get beaten up because of it too, similar to people beaten up because they are black.”

Along the same lines, another person argues that, in Victorian times it [red hair] was considered the mark of the devil or Cain and Ginger people were routinely discriminated as they were less trustworthy. In ancient greek [sic] times, many people believed those with red hair were vampires, and wouldn’t associate with them. I know it’s not the slave trade, but just saying.

Others respond to critical or historical comments by denying the importance of history. For example, some people present their confusion over why history is even relevant to conversations about racism today. One person asks,

It seems that by a lot of people's logic it is ok to mock someone or say something derogatory about an aspect of their appearance providing people like them in the past haven't been persecuted for it in one way or another? That'll be why racism against white people is okay.

Again, this commenter expresses sentiments of reverse racism, upset that alleged racism towards white people is "okay," even while recognizing that white people have not been subjected to historical oppression nor persecution in the same way that other racial groups have. People who feel that they are not privileged through their whiteness, or that their racial privilege does not outweigh the various other ways in which they may be oppressed, may participate in these types of discourses. It is also possible that bullying amongst white people, including ginger bullying, also exists as an outlet for feeling victimized.

One person who attempts to enter into a deeper discussion states that, There isn't a need for white identity groups in the states because whites in America are the majority so they are represented and do not feel isolated...Don't give me that white people are discriminated against in America rubbish [sic]. Who is at the bottom of every socio-economic ladder in the usa [sic]...I'll give you a guess their skin color is probably darker than yours.

Again however, the conversation is cut off. Someone responds saying, "Sorry to burst your time capsule, but the "white=good" equation was stomped to death sometime in the 1960s. In its place, almost overnight, the equation became "white=evil." This response again expresses fears of and belief in reverse racism. Only a few people across all the articles analyzed make any distinctions between systematic oppression and current problems with gingerism that might be more appropriately explained as bullying. One person comments,

The only ginger-bashing I've witnessed or taken part in [sic] was just teasing. I know there are people who take it too far and it turns into bullying, but people are bullied for all sorts of things. As far as I'm aware no one's actually been oppressed because they were ginger, so it's really not like racism.

This particular reader attempts to distinguish between bullying and oppression, and show fellow readers why the conflation is problematic. Along the same lines, another commenter attempts to bring an institutional perspective to the conversations: "Thing is you often hear about cases where, for example, someone wasn't given a job because they weren't white, but I have never once heard of any examples of this with gingers – just teasing." Both of these comments, like others attempting to move into a more complex

discussion of racism, again receive no engagement, but rather responses such as “stupid argument,” or further insistence that bullying of gingers has now reached a level of violence and seriousness such that it should be compared to racism. Similarly, the term oppression is never defined, nor discussed in detail.

As Mann and Stewart (2000) explain, although it allows for connectivity across geographically distant areas, computer mediated communication also has several drawbacks. In particular, in this case, there is not necessarily any impetus for response by one reader to another. Although responses to articles and to other readers’ comments are popular in the sites studied here, there are very few instances of sustained, back and forth dialogue between two readers that could potentially lead to any resolution of conflicting ideas. The comment below represents one of the most critical responses to the questions posed in each of the articles. The commenter, who comments at length on a board responding to the question of “is gingerism racism?” writes the following critical response to those who make accusations of reverse racism or insist upon gingerism being taken seriously.

It seems like white folks tend to assume that if they are on the wrong end of physical or ethnic stereotyping that this proves that racism is equal-opportunity (so to speak) or as if "now no one wants to attack POC so they turn on white people!" It seems much more that white supremacy is an active system that is always concerned with 1. sustaining itself by finding

new ways to express racism; and 2. creating and refining a hierarchy so that privilege and violence can be dished out.

In line with responses to other critical comments, the only response that this commenter receives is one that begins, "I would agree, except..." and goes on to describe biblical prejudice towards redheads, as well as the historical use of the phrase "beaten like a red-headed step child," and the tabloid treatment of Conan O'Brien as he was removed from The Tonight Show.

Although it is impossible to discern demographic information from anonymous internet postings unless people self-identify as part of particular groups, it could perhaps be assumed that the person writing about systems of white supremacy has had some exposure to formal education in this area, as opposed to others who possibly have not. The question then arises of the potential of mainstream internet sites as a place in which productive conversations and education about topics of race, racism and white privilege can happen. Although the internet today houses online communities of all different social, racial, and cultural positions (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007), mainstream, corporate news sites still uphold white supremacist ideologies in many ways (Sterne, 1999). In the comments sections on these mainstream news articles, explicit discussions of race do take place, but still largely reinforce such ideologies, despite the efforts of some to disrupt the conversations. Again, it is impossible to know exactly who is commenting unless they identify themselves, but we do know that gender, race, age, and income level all influence how likely a person is to actively participate in an online community, with

young, white, wealthy men having the highest rate of participation in the United States (Porter & Donthy, 2006).

Conclusion

As seen through comments left on these articles and forums, people define racism in multiple ways, and some of the more simplistic or literal definitions of racism that are used in these online conversations lead to over-simplified confluences of racism and bullying, of hair color discrimination and skin color discrimination, and the entire removal of these prejudices from any historical, structural, or societal contexts. Similarly, people engaging with the idea that allowing ginger prejudice to exist is a “double standard” are often also making use of these definitions. Further, such claims of double standards or “hypocrisies” lead to arguments of reverse racism. Complementing these arguments are those who claim that Irish and Scottish immigration histories to both the US and the UK solidify their place as an oppressed group of people. In response, some people do try to complicate these simplistic definitions and arguments of reverse racism, in multiple ways. Some people make the argument that hair color cannot be equated with skin color, because skin color is something outside of a person’s control, whereas hair color can be changed. Others further try to introduce structural, historical, or systematic aspects of racism and white supremacy, but are often met with little or no response. The majority of responses that do engage with these more complicated analyses of the gingerism situation seek to justify gingerism’s classification as equal to or as serious as racism, based on various historical prejudices against redheads. The overall lack of

engagement with or denial of structural critiques of racism can be understood as a product of white privilege.

It is easier and less threatening to one's power to claim that "even in biblical times" people despised redheads and thus discrimination has always existed against red haired people, than it is to recognize that there are serious distinctions to be made between bullying, oppression, and systemic racism. Carillo Rowe and Malhotra (2007) seek to "untangle the distinctions between whiteness as a universalizing privileging *process* and white identity and/or the white *body*" (p. 271). They dismantle the notion that "only white bodies negotiate whiteness, benefit from white privilege, or secure white supremacy" (p. 273). Regardless of redheaded/Celtric people's historically unstable whiteness and experienced oppressions, they have benefitted from and upheld the system of white supremacy in multiple ways.

CHAPTER 4

THE MC1R DNA TEST

In January of 2013, a genetics company called BritainsDNA announced the release of a new DNA test, branded as the “Chromo2 Red-Head Test.” The test determines if a person is a carrier of a mutation in the MC1R gene; mutations on this gene are responsible for the expression of red hair. The test premiered at a public genealogy conference in London called “Who Do You Think You Are?” At the conference were workshops on family history, representatives from historical societies, hundreds of exhibitors of genealogical tools and products, and DNA testing (Daily Mail Reporter, 2013).

The release of this test came in the midst of a cultural trend of jokes about gingers. Gingerism is typically interpreted as a more serious matter in the UK than in the US, as evidenced by the violence and sexual harassment suits mentioned in the introduction. In addition, in the UK there have been reports of escalating redheaded bullying in schools; parents of 15 year old Helena Farrell and 14 year old Simon Walters attribute their suicides in November 2013 to bullying over their hair color (Harding, 2013; Popular Teenager Killed Himself, 2013). A similar case was reported in 2009, after a 15 year old boy took his own life allegedly for the same reasons (Schoolboy Bullied, 2009).

In this chapter I will explore gingerism particularly within the British context, not to join in cultural debates over whether or not it constitutes a “legitimate” prejudice, but to question what its popularity and legitimization of red hair as a genetic mutation means at

this historical moment. In particular, this chapter will focus on the MC1R DNA test and public response to its release. I argue that recent invoking of scientific discourses in cultural conversations about gingerism serves a dual function. First, the use of these discourses legitimizes and reinscribes red hair as a “biological” or ethnic (and what some term) racial difference. Second, in response, this then leads some to believe it is worthy of special protections, contributing to and supporting the discourses of post-racism and reverse racism identified in the previous chapter. These issues offer potentially concerning questions over the role of the scientific industries in mediating cultural conversations about race and ethnicity. Further, response to these articles shows redheaded men and women are thought about differently even in this scientific context, and this test contributes to cultural perceptions about redheaded men as “less than men.”

To further explore this issue, following the methods of the previous chapter, I completed a discourse analysis of British news and tabloid articles, and reader comments. Articles and comments were based on coverage of the release of the MC1R DNA test in the context of the “Who Do You Think You Are?” exhibition. The articles analyzed were all published within the same one-week time frame. Additionally, each article came from a popular news source in the United Kingdom. Again, following Saukko, I sought not to uncover what “reality” these texts represent, but rather to more fully understand the specific cultural and historical contexts in which they participate. I first analyzed the language used in the articles themselves, comparing and contrasting across the texts. Next, I focused on the comments on each article. Comments were again analyzed across the seven texts, and then categorized into the themes presented below.

Through the following analysis, I will show that the language used in articles covering the release of this test frames having red hair as a genetic disease, both in and of itself, and because of the supposed medical “risks” that come with carrying a mutated version of the MC1R gene. The discourses used by news articles here confirm the appearance of red hair as a physical difference. Next, I will put these discourses in the context of an ongoing conversation about gingerism, its relationship to discourses of post-racism and reverse racism, and contested Irish and Scottish discrimination within England, as discussed in the previous chapter. I then seek to explore people’s broader concerns over the potential serious implications of this type of genetic testing in relationship to discourses of race and ethnicity. Finally, I will consider how masculinity, or a lack of masculinity becomes important in these conversations.

Red hair as a genetic disease

Much of the language used in the articles I analyzed presents having red hair as a genetic disease or disorder. Each of the seven articles studied is similar in terms of the information it includes; based on quoted material and the publication dates, presumably each was written after a press release by BritainsDNA or the “Who Do You Think You Are?” conference. One significant pattern across the texts is how each article represents the purpose of the MC1R DNA test. The majority of the articles studied represent the test as something potential parents would undergo before deciding to have children. For example, *Huffington Post UK* (2013) states that “Parents-to-be have the chance to find out whether they could have children with red hair.” *The Daily Mail* (2012) claims that,

“Couples are being offered DNA tests to see if they are carrying the ‘ginger gene.’” Similarly, *The Mirror* (2013) states that, “Couples who want to know if they could have ginger babies are being offered red hair-detecting DNA tests.” Although the test premiered at a genealogical conference, only one article connects the purpose of the test to pursuits of family history, stating it was “designed to trace people’s ancestry” (Collins, 2013).

The texts also each make use of typical language used in popular culture to talk about genetic diseases (Condit & Williams, 1997). Multiple articles invoke the use of 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 all of the negative “side effects” that accompany being redheaded. Several articles also use the phrase “appear out of nowhere,” referring to the fact that because variants of the MC1R genes are recessive, they may be passed along for generations, without being expressed. *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.” The ominous warning given in this article serves to further inscribe red hair as a potentially concerning “disorder.”

Finally, the articles also all offer some presentation of the “risks” of having red hair. For example, *The Huffington Post UK* presents the “social risks” associated with this hair color. The article states, “recent research suggests red hair is associated with significantly less attractiveness and a lack of congeniality.” *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. A follow up article from *The Daily Mail* (2013) 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. Even the *Stylist*, a magazine largely concerned with fashion, notes that recent studies “link the colouring to heightened feelings of pain.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, these studies are not typically cited.

The invoking of scientific rhetoric to confirm the attribute of red hair as a biological difference is reminiscent of historical attempts to define and hierarchize people based on physical and racial characteristics. As Tony Kushner (2005) reminds us, “race

science” worked hard to find proof of “natural inferiority or inherent and unsavoury difference” through the middle of the twentieth century (p. 207-8). Although scholars disagree about whether or not this type of science was actually used with regards to white ethnic immigrants as it was for those of non-white groups, scholars do agree that the use of science in matters of race has historically invoked a power that both naturalizes and hierarchizes difference (Hannaford, 1996; Harding, 1993; Rich, 1990).

Reader responses to red hair as a genetic disorder

Readers of these articles were often concerned with and upset by the presentation of red hair as equivalent to a genetic disorder, or as one red-headed reader put it “they’re making us out to be freaks.” In response to the *Huffington Post UK* article, one commenter states, “Have a test to see if you are going to have a ginger kid or not, how bad is that. I would rather have a test to check for birth defects. These sort of scientist [sic] should be struck off for waisting [sic] time...” A commenter on *The Daily Mail* asks, “Why is there even a test for this? Leave us gingers alone. There is nothing wrong with us.” Another commenter on that same article asks, “A carrier of the gene?...This makes it sound like some sort of hideous disease.” Another claims, “This article makes it sounds like having red hair is an affliction! ‘Carriers’? Of the ‘ginger gene’??? How rude!”

Multiple readers across the articles state that the presentation of the gene as a disease is

either “offensive” or “scary.” 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 represents the physical expression of red hair both as a literal genetic mutation, and as readers interpret it, as a cultural marker for potential discrimination. Featherstone and Atkinson explain in their work on genetic mutations and disorders that,

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 (p. 25).

The authors go on to explain that despite breakthroughs in science and medical “objectivity,” there can exist no unmediated understandings of diseases or disorders, since we are always already viewing them through a system of knowledge that is deeply embedded in political and social power structures. The labeling of red hair as a genetic disorder through these news articles offers an example of what Featherstone and Atkinson might call a “hyper-created” or “hyper-produced” disease (p. 26). The authors argue that every disease can be traced historically and that often the narratives surrounding them are not neat or smooth. Rather, changes in social structures, in systems of classification, and in medical technology all contribute to the production or creation (or erasure) of particular diseases.

Concern for the cultural mistreatment of redheads

Although the majority of articles do not discuss bullying of redheads, or introduce the term gingerism at all, readers, likely already aware of or perhaps even part of these cultural conversations, draw links between the MC1R test and gingerism as is experienced in daily life. As seen in the previous chapter where people directly confront the question of “is gingerism racism?” many people use the comments section as a public space in which to demand recognition of the legitimacy of this problem, and to call for protections for redheads, especially children who are the victims of increasingly severe bullying in schools. Many commenters recognize the release of this test as perpetuating stereotyping and bullying of gingers. Multiple cultural institutions, including the scientific industries, the British government, and the mass media are accused of contributing to this problem. One commenter on the *Huffington Post UK* says, “Its [sic] people like these scientists that cause the bullying at school of the ginger population.”

Another person responds, “To offer this as a test shows how science and anyone else in authority who advocates this test is just feeding into primal prejudice.” 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.”

Other readers put the blame on the media outlets 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.” As Jayaratne et al. (2006) confirm, 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. People then begin to use these theories in simplified ways, creating what Jayaratne et al. refer to as “genetic lay theories.” Belief in genetic lay theories leads to essentialist thinking, and creates the impression that “social categories are discrete, immutable, and determined by natural forces” (p. 79). Further, genetic theories can serve as ideologies that legitimize racist and other discriminatory modes of thinking, because of the often unquestioned power of science in our society.

Similar to discussions in the previous chapter, of particular importance here is how concerns over the genetic testing for this gene tend to conflate different forms of experienced social oppression. Although these articles themselves do not directly address race in the same way as those in the previous chapter did, the word racism is used often by commenters. 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.” Other echo similar sentiments. For example, one person says, “It’s rightly totally unacceptable to be unkind to people because of their skin colour or ethnicity but apparently almost a national pastime to do so because of hair colour.” Another person

goes so far as to say, “Calling someone with red hair ginger is as racist and nasty as calling someone with dark skin a name.” Of course conflation of oppressions is dangerous, especially conflation of racial oppressions between white and non-white groups. As Applebaum explains, conflating different markers of identity can “obscure significant differences between the types of suffering experienced by these different social groups” (p. 158).

As in the previous chapter, I do not introduce this discourse to enter into an analysis of comparative oppressions, but rather to highlight that this is one central way in which the gingerism phenomenon is discussed within the predominantly and historically white British culture. One reader introduces the problematic term of “casual racism.” She says,

I don't understand why I, as Briton living in Britain, suffer casual racism everyday due to my hair colour. I've had people shout ginger at me in the street, strangers talk loudly about it in public and are [sic] faced with articles like this roughly every 3 months. Don't get me wrong, I love my hair colour but I hate the fact in my native country I can be abused because of it.

Another reader offers a similar comment,

I know this will sound a little over the top, but honestly, if such negativity were conferred onto any other minority in society it would be an arrestable offence for

being some kind of –‘ism’...why are people allowed to bully people [sic] because of their hair colour and think it’s funny? Wouldn’t be okay if it was about race, creed or skin colour.

Drawing from critical whiteness studies, these types of responses fit with larger social patterns of people recognizing oppression, especially of race, on individual levels, but not on systemic levels. For example, the first commenter above cites people shouting the word “ginger” at her in the street as “casual racism.” Public response to the gingerism phenomenon shows that popular culture understandings of racism often conflate racism with bullying, and ignore or are unaware of the systemic and structural factors that perpetuate racism. Again, as in the previous chapter, many people use the phenomenon to perpetuate ideas of a post-race society, or even a society in which reverse racism is popular (Bonilla-Silva & Lewis, 2003). For example, one person claims that the test is an “incredible waste of our money and utterly offensive to every white person in this Nation.” Many make the claim that this is the “last acceptable form of discrimination,” or that all other groups are given special protections, and by this logic, this leaves white people vulnerable. Fears of reverse racism are well-documented amongst white populations. Myers (2003) employs the term, “white fright” to describe the fear that white people are “at risk” of becoming a minority. These types of fears often lead to accusations of reverse racism, such as those seen by commenters in these articles.

On the one hand, commenters make quite dangerous accusations and connotations, which often serve to further entrench systematic racism. However, on the other hand, their conclusions are potentially complicated or at least influenced by histories of Irish and Scottish immigrants being viewed as 'non-white' minorities in England. As John Marriot (1999) argues in his work on poor, white, ethnic immigrants in London, "the poor were constructed as a race apart" (p. 82). The Irish, in particular, were viewed as dirty, ignorant, and as intrinsically linked with crime. Marriot argues that in this historical context, whiteness was aligned with cleanliness, and the poor were explicitly marked as non-white, because of their associations with dirt, slums and disease (p. 85). The labeling of redheaded people (who are often read as Irish despite varied ethnic backgrounds (Heckert & Best, 1997, p. 373-4) as genetically diseased perhaps invokes this historically sentiment for many people of Irish descent living in Great Britain. Marriot again reminds us of the importance of the historical colonial relationship between England and Ireland, arguing that this relationship and the linked "assertion of superiority" on behalf of the English was necessary for this process of racialization of poor Irish immigrants to occur.

Most of the articles specifically cite the percentages of red haired people or MC1R mutation carriers in each of the countries in the Anglo-American world. The majority begin by listing the total percentage of carriers in Ireland and Scotland, and then contrast those figures with England's much lower overall percentage. For example, the *Daily Mail* (2013) states that,

About 40 per cent of men and women in Ireland carry a red head variant, but only 10 per cent have red hair. In Scotland, just over 30 per cent are known carriers and up to 13 per cent have red hair, while in England only 6 per cent have red hair.

Similarly, several articles offer the advice that one can do a “pre-screening” of him or herself for the possibility of passing on an MC1R mutation by asking the following questions, “Do you have any redheads in your family? Are there any redheads in your partner’s family? Do any of your ancestors come from Ireland or Scotland?” (Huffington Post UK). Although there is no explicit prejudice expressed in the presentation of these figures, when this information comes after reading about the gene in the context of a mutation, or disorder, the message is that this “disease” can primarily be found in Irish and Scottish people. Many scholars, like Marriot, argue for the importance of remembering the conflicted and complex, colonial historical relationships that Ireland and Scotland have with England (see also Dyer (1997) and Ignatiev (1995)). Additionally, other scholars assert the importance of looking historically at the multiple, historically distinct periods of immigration by both the Irish and Scottish to England, and the prejudicial treatment that often took place.

It is important also to remember that the physical appearance of whiteness as we perceive it today reflects a relatively recent conceptualization of what being “white” means. As many have argued, throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, both Irish and Scottish immigrants in the UK as well as in the US, were viewed alternatively as “non-

white” or in an “in-between” way, and as second class citizens to the English, despite similar physical appearances (Delaney, p. 125). Dr. Diane Negra explains in an interview with the Irish newspaper *Sunday Independent* that for the British in Ireland,

The shock of the fact that the people they were colonizing were a great deal like them had to be negotiated and one of the ways that happens is by making the local people primitive, insisting they are physically different in a variety of ways. Red hair in the British context does seem constantly to connote the sense of not only difference, not only suspicion, but also that it is an ugliness that cannot be rehabilitated or redeemed. Red hair is seen to be a physical deficiency not a physical asset...It becomes a disturbing link to a history and a set of cultural relations, that many people might wish to leave in the past.

Red hair became one such negative marker of difference for the British colonizing Ireland, associated with markers of race and class, etc.

The MC1R DNA Test as a precursor to 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 the majority of articles frame the purpose of the test as a test for potential parents who are interested in seeing whether or not they could carry a redheaded child, many readers are concerned about the test being used as a form of selective genetic engineering of future children. One reader in response to the *Huffington Post UK* article claims, “This is pure evil, what next will they think off. Wont [sic] this cause children to be aborted?” The claim 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. Although the test is designed for adults prior to conception, and not fetuses, this distinction becomes blurred in both the discourse of the news articles, and in people's responses to them. One 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!!!" Others express concern that this is in fact a government funded project to preserve (white) "Englishness." Many people throughout the comments sections describe English culture as insular and prejudicial, again referencing histories of immigration and colonization, not only of Irish and Scottish, 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.

Even further than concerns over selective genetic engineering, some readers go so far as to make claims of outright eugenics, both directly and indirectly. Indirectly, people refer to Hitler and WWII. For example, one person claims, "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..." More directly, one person claims that, "This is the result of teaching Darwinian mythology to a

generation. It is the start of eugenics. This article isn't about ginger-haired people. It's about propagating the acceptance of gene manipulation and gene filtering."

Simultaneous desire and reluctance to invoke the term "eugenics" itself is a consequence of the complicated nature of this contested prejudice. On the one hand, it can be viewed as trivial (just a joke), or even as satirical, commenting upon the state of more historically and materially recognized prejudices. (This is often the explanation given for the now infamous *South Park* episode and the M.I.A. music video, "Born Free"). Understandably, many (white) gingers find something problematic with claiming they are being targeted for discrimination because of their hair and skin color, which is often interpreted as their race in these contexts. As Simpson (2007) explains, even talking about race, or identifying racial differences is seen as "wrong" by many white people. At the same time, many people, especially those with red hair living in the UK, represent their lived experiences as negatively influenced by the phenomenon and many do claim that the oppression they feel is racially based.

Genetic testing and masculinity

Important to recognize, as well, are the differences in how people respond to these discourses, both serious and joking, with regard to gender. As discussed in the introduction, men and women with red hair are subjected to different stereotypes. The alleged symptoms of this disorder, including needing higher doses of anesthesia and over-sensitivity to pain, can be interpreted as weakness, in line with larger cultural

stereotypes about redheaded men. Alleging that redheads are particularly susceptible to a variety of diseases has the same effect. As Kimmel (2008) argues, particular groups of men are viewed as “less than real men.” Historically in Western cultures, this has included Jewish men and some groups of Asian men who have been represented as cowardly and effeminate (Ling, 1997; Broad, 2008). In response to accusations of eugenics by some commenters, others agree that the test has eugenic-implications, but that the gene should be tested for only in males. For example, one person writes, “Please, god, only screen for it on the male side.” Another comments, “It’s lovely to be a gingerkop...only if you’re a girl. Ginger boy foetuses should be aborted.” These comments, while perhaps not seriously recommending the abortion of male fetuses carrying the MC1R mutation, are indicative of a cultural distaste towards redheaded men.

Similarly, in response to these articles, people often express prejudice against or dislike for gingers, then qualify it with a statement explaining that this feeling only applies towards male gingers. Male gingers are typically referred to as “unattractive,” “weak,” “freaky,” or “creepy looking.” A few people express an attraction towards redheaded men, but offer a disclaimer that they know they are going against cultural norms. For example, one person, writes, “I think they are attractive...but i [sic] would get made fun of if i [sic] dated a ginger so that would probably hold me back.” Another writes, “I have recently discovered that I am wicked attracted to gingers and was quite

surprised by it.” These comments represent cultural ideas about ginger men widely being viewed unattractive.

Within this context of a scientifically recognized mutation, people also recognize that bullying can often be much more severe for boys with red hair than it can for girls.

Many people express sentiments such as, “its fine on a girl, but lads get loads of grief if they are ginger,” and “boys always seem to get teased so much worse.” One parent

comments, “My son has ginger hair and his life is an absolute misery because of it.”

Redheaded girls can also be subjected to bullying, unless they are exempt from being “gingers” by other markers of physical attractiveness, in which case their hair color

becomes something to be fetishized, rather than something to be made fun of. Often commenters indicate that they find female redheads particularly attractive and often

express stereotypes of hyper-sexuality. For instance, one person writes, “Red heads, just love ‘em. I much prefer that hair colour to any other in a woman, and my experience is

they go that extra mile - every time! A bit on the wild side, and that’s all the better.”

Again, the concept of the redhead versus the ginger is made clear. In fact, many people

explicitly refer to and distinguish between attractive women as “redheads” and men and

unattractive redheaded women as “gingers.”

Comments such as these are part of a larger pattern may be referred to as, within this scientific context, a “hierarchy of redheads” – in which only certain combinations of skin and hair color are considered “inoffensive” or aesthetically pleasing. One person comments that the model on the front of a Telegraph article about the MC1R DNA test “doesn’t look to [sic] bad.” Another responds to this, saying, “She’s not a carrot-top, she’s auburn. It’s not really on the ginger list.” Another says, “Redheads are one thing, Gingers are another.” Additionally, many are quick to point out that “true red” hair can be considered attractive, while “orange” hair never is. Other markers are also important: a large number of freckles combined with very pale skin (the most typical skin tone found with red hair) is often referred to as “gross” or “creepy.” Similarly, very light eyebrows or eyelashes that might look like an “apparent lack of eyebrows” or lashes are talked about in the same ways. Qualities at the top of the hierarchy of redheads, such as dark red or auburn hair, slightly tanned, unfreckled skin, and darker eyebrows and eyelashes can, in some cases, exempt people, particularly women, from the negative symbolic meanings associated with gingers.

In efforts to combat ginger prejudice, in commenting on these articles, people are much more likely to use a female rather than male friend or relative to insist that not all redheads are considered unattractive. For example, “I have blonde hair but my sister is a red head and she is so so pretty. She is pretty because she is different looking, she stands

out from the crowd,” and “My daughter is stunning and has won child of the year 3 times so it cant be that bad can it!!!!” Although people do make comments about male relatives and friends, they are made much more often about females. In addition to using personal anecdotes and familial relations to justify redheaded attractiveness, people also reference celebrities. The list of redheaded male celebrities is much shorter than that of females (examples are largely limited to Damian Lewis and Prince Harry for males, and Christina Hendricks, Karen Gillan, Amy Adams, and even fictionalized characters such as Jessica Rabbit for females). Of course there are very few redheaded male media figures, and even fewer who are thought of as sex symbols, rather than clown-type actors and comedians (such as Conan O’Brien, or Carrot Top). The lack of redheaded male celebrities is significant because of mass media’s role in creating and perpetuating beauty ideals and standards in our society (Wolf, 1991).

Conclusion

As we have seen, public response to the release of the MC1R DNA test has been varied and reflects broader discourses about race, ethnicity, and science’s role in perpetuating and contributing to these socially constructed categories. In particular, people offer concern that having red hair is presented as a genetic disorder, that science and business authorities are contributing to and legitimizing ginger prejudice, and that the current cultural conversations about gingers are heading towards the resurrection of eugenic ideals. These concerns are undermined and complicated by the use of gingerism to claim oppression and reverse racism in what some readers problematically identify as a

post-racial world. Additionally, discussions of gender take a central role in this context. Readers both suggest that this test will contribute to bullying and stereotyping of male gingers, and also suggest that the eugenic implications of this test should be used to identify redheaded male fetuses.

CHAPTER 5

REBRANDING REDHEADS

As seen in the last chapter, science is becoming more and more involved in cultural discussions about gingerism. One particular way in which these scientific discourses have been used is to argue that redheaded men are biologically unattractive, undesirable, and not masculine. Two years prior to the release of the MC1R DNA test, Cryos, the world's largest network of sperm banks announced that they would no longer take sperm donations from red-headed men, citing low demand from clients (Orange, 2011). Ole Schu, the managing director of Cryos, stated in an interview he gave with Vice.com that, "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" (Cross, 2013). Public outrage and accusations of discrimination followed the banning. Schu's decision, although considered offensive at the time, actually preceded scientific explorations into and confirmations of an alleged public dislike for red hair. A 2012 psychological study entitled, "Hair Colour and

Courtship: Blond Women Received More Courtship Solicitations and Redhead Men Received More Refusals,” garnered much attention in the blogosphere and online media outlets. Researcher Nicolas Guéguen concluded that red haired women are approached less often by members of the opposite gender and redheaded men are rejected more often by members of the opposite gender in bars than any other hair color (Guéguen, 2012).

Although the study was critiqued heavily for both its methodology (which involved dyed wigs rather than natural hair colors) and assumptions of stereotypical heterosexual behaviors, it was viewed by some as scientific justification that cultural distaste towards redheads (especially men) is “natural.”

Discussions about gingers in the online sphere have shown that within the US and Great Britain, redheaded men are typically viewed as unattractive, weak, and effeminate; the involvement of science has only strengthened these stereotypes. In response to such stereotypes, in 2013 photographer Thomas Knights released a photo exhibition featuring highly sexualized redheaded male models, with stereotypically attractive masculine bodies. The exhibition, entitled “Red Hot,” aims to “create the image of a positive role model for ginger men because there’s a serious lack of them” (Waterlow, 2013). 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” (Waterlow, 2013). 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” (Waterlow, 2013). Knights himself posits that the stereotyping has a long history: “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” (Waterlow, 2013). In addition, like others, he suggests that the discrimination takes a more serious turn in the UK than in the US.

Knights’s website, Redhot100.com, states that the project began with an idea:

To put ginger guys in the spotlight like never seen before. To show them as desirable...as alpha males...Sexual...Confident...Heroic...as the ULTIMATE MALE. No one had EVER done this before in the history of the world. Literally. Never. Ever. And so began RED HOT his longterm [sic] vision ‘to rebrand the ginger male stereotype’ (Red Hot 100).

This chapter will consider the press surrounding the Red Hot exhibition, as well as public response to it in the form of online comments. I argue that Knight’s attempt to rebrand redheaded men as stereotypically masculine, and sexually desirable, fails because the symbolic ideas associated with gingeriness (which becomes read, in this context, as hyperwhiteness) are incompatible with those of an idealized, traditional masculinity. First, I will show the importance of the redheaded “hierarchy” and separation of hair color from skin color within this context. Secondly, I will explore discussions of race and

colorism as they take place in these particular forums. Finally, I will consider the concept of authenticity with regard to masculinity and to red hair.

Hierarchy of redheadedness

Images from the Red Hot exhibit in the articles I analyzed feature medium shots of redheaded, shirtless men in a variety of poses. All of the men are pictured against the same bright blue background, creating stark contrast with their hair color. Although the majority of men appear white and have some freckles, not all have very pale skin, and there are some who appear biracial. As in the previous chapters, readers invoke the idea of a redheaded hierarchy or spectrum. In this context, the spectrum provides a background against which to focus on red hair color as separable and distinct from very light skin color and freckles. In discussing the intrinsic unattractiveness of redheaded men, one comment reads, “I don’t think it’s the hair colour, but the pallor which goes with it. Pale complexion was always valued in women, not so in men.” In this comment, the reader genders pale skin, associating it with women. Another states, “It is not the hair in itself that is offensive, but the white freckled skin and ginger eyelashes with pale grey eyes;” this person goes on to say that the only redheaded men who can potentially be attractive “are [actually] auburn (or strawberry blonde) and have clear (freckle free) skin and dark eyes...” In other words, those men with red hair that have any potential of desirability do not fit the criteria of “true” gingers on the redheaded spectrum (ie. very pale skin, freckles, orange-toned hair, and light eyebrows and lashes). Similarly, another

person says that, “Its [sic] not the hair that is the turn off it is the unattractive whitey pink freckley [sic] skin and spots. They always look ill and unhealthy and THAT is why so many folk [sic] find them unattractive.” Importantly, many others take up the idea that these men look “sickly” because of their pale skin; these comments appear often despite the hyper-muscular appearances of each model.

As discussed in the chapter on the MC1R DNA test, sickliness or weakness are thought to be mutually exclusive from manliness. In response to a comment saying that the men appear “sickly,” one person adds, “90% of them look gay.” Redheaded men are quite widely thought to be effeminate and weak, both qualities that are often falsely conflated with male homosexuality. Despite the fact that the creator of the show frames the issue of discrimination as one of hair color, in the context of reader comments, it is these men’s skin color, rather than their hair color, that marks them as effeminate.

However, as we will see, even when they do not have very pale skin, ginger men are unable to distance themselves from their symbolic hyperwhiteness; hyperwhiteness is read on these men as explicitly non-masculine, despite their embodiment of other codes of traditional masculinity.

Discussions of race and colorism

With the distinction between hair color and skin color becoming more apparent in news coverage of Knights’s exhibit than in other contexts, the conversation surrounding gingerism changes. As seen in the previous chapters, the argument is often made by those

claiming that gingerism is racism that if skin color were substituted for hair color, this type of prejudice would be deemed racism. Here, a reader writes, for example:

It is illogical and totally unfair to pick on someone because of the colour of their hair (or skin, or anything else). If it's skin it's racism, if it's hair you get away with it. Often it can be very damaging to the victim, and everyone should know better than to make hurtful remarks.

However, in the case of the “Red Hot” exhibition, people do actually make quite clear distinctions between hair color and skin tone, and more often cite their distaste for ginger people as a result of their skin rather than hair color (ie. as one person summarizes, “it’s not the hair it’s the skin”). Furthermore, people discuss the very light, freckled skin color most often associated with red hair as “ugly,” “creepy,” and “sickening.” Some people turn the discussion away from racism or reverse racism and towards the topic of colorism.

Burke (2008) defines colorism as, “the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the darkness and lightness of one’s skin” (p. 17). Burton et al. further explain that colorism typically “favor[s] lighter skin over darker skin as indicated by a person’s appearance as proximal to a White phenotype” (p. 440). In response to the discussion of gingerism, however, some readers argue that colorism disadvantages them based on their light, rather than dark skin. For instance, one woman who identifies herself as Hispanic

and who seeks to confirm reverse colorism in the culture at large to support claims of gingerism, says:

I live in a mostly Hispanic population, (deep south texas [sic]) and when I moved here I was made fun of because im [sic] fair skinned and look more white than the traditional tan-dark skinned mexican americans [sic] here. I was called all sorts of names.

Another person writes, “The colorism part is interesting...Colorism there is the opposite in this century [sic] – the tanner/darker you are, the more attractive you are...” Another reader replies to this, saying, “i [sic] agree. it [sic] is as if you can’t be white without not being white!” In this comment, the reader first uses “white” in a symbolic sense, invoking meanings of normalcy or cultural centrality, and then subsequently uses it to describe a literal white skin color, pointing to the importance of Carillo Rowe and Malhotra's (2007) conception of “unhinged whiteness.” Appeals to normalcy also come with less direct links to whiteness. As one commenter asserts, “LOL!! Only a ginger would do something like this. Create an expo to show how normal they really are.”

Although Burke’s definition of colorism is well-supported within the literature on colorism, recent research on beauty standards has also shown that pale skin is not necessarily considered desirable in today’s society. Frisby (2006) found that light brown skin was perceived as more attractive than both very pale and very dark skin in a study of

models in advertisements. Ethnically ambiguous models and actors are now used more often than before in an effort to advertise to a wider demographic of people (Valdivia, 2008); perhaps beauty ideals now reflect this new trend. Despite the distinctions between racism and colorism that arise in this context, similar to conversations that took place in the first chapter, accusations of “reverse colorism” in response to articles about the Red Hot exhibition do not move beyond talking about individual experiences with name calling or feelings of unattractiveness.

Authenticity: Not real redheads

Out of those people who agree that the models presented in the Red Hot exhibition do meet cultural standards of physical attractiveness, some argue that because the men in the photographs are in fact presented as conventionally “hot,” that some aspect of their appearances have been altered. In other words, it is impossible for many readers to conceive of a man as simultaneously red-haired, traditionally masculine, and sexually desirable. One person claims that, “Some of these look like they have dyed their hair red and dont [sic] look natural gingers.” A similar comment reads, “Some of these guys either had their hair photoshopped red, or it’s colored – it’s not natural.” Another agrees, saying “what’s the bets these blokes aren’t actually ginger?” Someone else says, “some certainly look like they may have been altered.” People attempt to find clues that hair has been dyed, like a lack of freckled skin, or allegedly too dark a skin tone. In these particular

cases, red hair is not symbolically disarticulated from very pale, freckled skin, but rather acts as a marker of inauthenticity for some readers.

These types of responses are representative of a cultural belief that redheaded men cannot simultaneously be redheaded and masculine in the way that Knight's attempts to rebrand them. Other commenters express this idea clearly: "Nope...Doesn't do anything for me i'm [sic] afraid! Gingers will always be known as pale and freckled, not tanned etc, making them out to be someone they arn't [sic]!" Another states, "Red is NOT hot no matter how one looks at it there is no sex appealnone at all." A similar comment reads, "no thanks!! you [sic] can try to re brand [sic] them all you want but orange hair is not attractive and orange facial hair is worse!!!" A commenter who is slightly more appreciative of the exhibit states that, "they are all very cute boys but not exactly sexy." Although this commenter is not as dismissive as the others, s/he directly refers to the men as "boys" with the descriptor of "cute," infantilizing them and reaffirming that they are children, rather than adult men.

Conclusion

Within the context of the Red Hot exhibit, ginger men's appearances are placed within a hierarchy of redheadedness, and distinctions between red hair and very pale, freckled skin are made. Conversations move from concerns over reverse racism or inherited racial prejudice, towards discussions of reverse colorism. The authenticity of

the images published in the articles is questioned, based on a cultural understanding that gingeriness, which stands in for hyperwhite identity, is incompatible with traditional, sexually attractive masculinity. Against a cultural backdrop in which there are increasing socially acceptable options for presentations of white masculine identity, boundaries have been put in place. Gingers cannot be “real men,” to use Kimmel’s term, not because of their hair color, but because of what they have come to stand for. There is a fear that whiteness equals weakness and ginger men offer a scapegoat, extreme version of this. In this case, gingers are seen as so white, that they in some ways are no longer white, meaning no longer part of what can be considered “normal” or acceptable. Rather than pointing towards fears about reverse racism, the comments in this section suggest that the fear lies more in the idea that whiteness makes one weak and vulnerable.

As discussed in the literature review, during the transition from male anxiety to anger in the 1990s, alternative depictions of manhood, or “wimps” were attacked within popular culture (Kimmel, 2006, p. 193). In today’s mainstream American culture, socially acceptable masculinities are multiple, but are acceptable only if stylized and commercialized in particular ways. For example, the once (in some ways) subjugated white male nerd culture has become mainstream and recognized through the commercial success of “geek chic” styles and behaviors. By becoming incorporated, it has been made safe, or non-threatening to the power of traditional masculinity (Williams, 1977). Lest these new, “alternative” masculinities push the boundaries of dominant, white heteropatriarchy too far, however, hyperwhite gingers offer a scapegoat onto which to

place anxieties about associations between white masculinity, weakness, and effeminacy.

The male ginger perhaps represents white men's fears about how they are perceived in the broader culture.

CONCLUSIONS

Summary of arguments

In the previous chapters, I first looked at explicit discussions of race and gingerism, then at these themes within the context of the public release of the MC1R DNA test, and finally within the context of publicity surrounding the Red Hot 100 exhibit. I sought to answer the questions of, how is racism conceptualized and understood within popular culture, as seen through discussions of whether or not gingerism constitutes racism? How do commenters respond or interact when their understandings of racism or explanations for gingerism are challenged by other commenters? And finally, what does the creation of and prejudice against/making fun of a “hyperwhite” masculine identity at this social/historical moment suggest about the current stability of the dominant white masculine identity?

In the first section, “Is Gingerism as Bad as Racism?” I found that within discussions of race and gingerism, readers of the various blogs, articles and forums analyzed make use of varying definitions of race and racism. These different definitions and their use in discussions sometimes lead to conflation of racism, oppression, and bullying. Simplified and individualized definitions of race and racism also lead to arguments supporting reverse racism and post-racism, as well as accusations of racial “double standards.” These arguments are bound up in questions of ethnic and national identity, particularly having to do with Irish and Scottish immigrant heritage in both the United States and United Kingdom contexts.

In the next section, “The MC1R DNA Test,” I looked at the publicity surrounding and public responses to the release of the so-called “ginger gene” test. I found that commenters in this chapter reflected many of the themes from the previous chapter. Specifically, readers in this chapter also voice concerns over reverse discrimination and racism towards Celtic peoples. In this context, these concerns are based on fears of eugenics and genetic engineering of non-redheaded children. The publicity surrounding the MC1R DNA test often presents having red hair as an undesirable genetic disorder or mutation. Most readers respond negatively to these descriptions, although some use them to justify their prejudicial attitudes toward red haired people. Furthermore, readers in this section also offered specific concern about how this test will affect redheaded males. Within this medicalized context, ginger maleness becomes linked with genetic inferiority and weakness.

In the final section, “Rebranding Redheads,” I looked at conversations about redheaded photographer Thomas Knights’s “Red Hot 100” exhibition, whose goal is to “rebrand redheads,” as sexually attractive, normatively masculine men. Here, readers separate out “gingerness” into red hair and the very pale, freckled skin color often associated with it. Many respondents note that they are unattracted, not to red hair, but to this hyperwhite skin color. Gingerness comes to stand in for hyperwhiteness, and both take on symbolic meanings of weakness and effeminacy. Discussions about race turn to discussions about skin color, more specifically. The authenticity of the sexually

attractive, redheaded white male is questioned and I conclude that the symbolic meanings associated with gingeriness are so strong and antithetical to the symbolic meanings associated with dominant masculinity, that the men featured in the exhibit cannot embody them both.

Online engagement around issues of race

I repeatedly recognized in each chapter that discussions about racism and oppression often fizzled out, or did not move forward in any productive ways, leading me to question whether the internet, and particularly comment threads on mainstream news media sites, are appropriate or effective places for these conversations to take place. Much of what I analyzed fits into McKee's (2002) conception of "white discourses" that persist in online communication about race. For example, denials of privilege and refusals to see racism and other forms of oppression as systematic and historical were common (p. 418). Although McKee's work looks specifically at discussions of race online in which people become offended, there is, in the posts which she analyzes, some effort toward engagement in conversation or argument, and a willingness to further explain one's point of view. In the comments that I looked at, this was overwhelmingly not the case.

There could be many reasons for this, including the fact that comment threads are not typically used in real time, and people may abandon them once they've made an initial posting. However, it could also be the case, as some scholars have suggested, that online spaces impose limitations for true critical engagement, or that we first, before we

can judge the effectiveness of such digital public spaces, need to redefine what civic and political engagement would look like, in an online context (Brundige & Rice, 2009).

Future work

There are several questions to which this project points. First, as discussed in the previous section, what are ways in which these conversations might be made more productive? As mentioned, online comment threads do not require responses to difficult propositions, or require, or sometimes even allow, that a person explain her/his ideas in more detail, resulting in short, unfinished conversations about these complex topics.

Secondly, the invention of and marketing around the MC1R DNA test suggests that there are important issues to discuss with regard to genetic testing and discourses about race and science. Invoking science in discussions of race and whiteness risks essentializing these categories in problematic ways. With the increasing popularity of for-profit ancestral DNA testing, these issues are becoming more apparent. Genetics may sometimes align with social group categories, but do not necessarily do so. On the one hand, some people argue that showing that humans' ancestral histories overlap more than they might think could potentially lead to increased understanding that race is a socially constructed category. Even more, it may help people understand that their own individual racial and ethnic histories are perhaps not as "neat" as they might imagine. On the other hand, promoting the idea that "we are all the same" (as in "one human race") ignores the fact that though socially constructed categories, the material effects of racism are quite real, and in this way such genetic tests may further lead to undermining the specific concerns of various oppressed groups by dominant groups.

Finally, because this project focused on white masculinity, not enough attention was paid to the ways in which red hair is interpreted on women's or non-white people's bodies. Although research does exist on the history of red hair and femininity (see, for example, Roach, 2005), the "ugliness" associated with gingeriness and women has not yet been explored. The concept of the non-white ginger likewise has not yet been interrogated (if such a concept exists). Future research might look at these issues and ask how meanings about whiteness, weakness, and physical attractiveness are ascribed differently to these other groups of people. Similarly, future work should also focus more on the disentanglement of issues of race, ethnicity, gender and physical attractiveness, exploring how they are and are not connected.

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