

THE GINGER, THE PIN-UP, OR THE STEPCHILD? REDHEADEDNESS AS AN
EMBODIED TROPE

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ABSTRACT

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The study of redheadedness has been largely neglected in the academic community and beyond. Besides a few outdated psychology studies, pop culture books, a handful of student theses, and one dissertation, there has been little investigation regarding how the tropes associated with redheadedness—namely, weakness and unattractiveness in men and unruliness and hypersexuality in women—become embodied. This project considers the way that such tropes are internalized in a variety of “texts”: Scott P. Harris’s documentary, *Being Ginger*; Marion Roach’s and Jacky Colliss Harvey’s personal narratives; and Tim Minchin’s song (and performance of) “Prejudice,” together with an interview he gave for *The Guardian*. Using Krista Ratcliffe’s method of rhetorical listening, I reveal the ways that these texts identify and disidentify with redheadedness. Despite the authors’ awareness of redhead-related stereotypes, these texts continue to perpetuate many of those same stereotypes in subtle and complex ways.

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INTRODUCTION

To have red hair is to stand out, regardless of age or gender. Red hair means strangers reaching out and touching your locks without requesting permission, without any regard for personal space. As a child, I was told by older women that I must never dye my hair—that my red curls were “rare” and “special.” In middle school, I was sitting at a hockey game when I heard a grown man behind me yell, “beat him like a redheaded stepchild!” As a newly-made stepchild with red hair, I was taken aback by the phrase and its call to violence. When I asked my mom what it meant, she found no explanation other than, “it’s just something people say, I don’t know.” In high school in Southern California, I was called “Ginger” more often than my own name—it was not endearing. “Fire crotch” and “Flame On” were also in the mix. I was an annual victim on “Kick a Ginger Day,” where my peers would “playfully” kick me in the shins. Other redheads (usually boys) have been injured much more seriously since the “joke” holiday was created in 2008, with some cases being so severe that they required hospitalizations. I was told by peers that I wasn’t allowed on social media boards because I was a “soulless” Ginger (thank you, *South Park*), and, as a senior in high school, I caught myself lying in bed one night wondering if it was true: what if I didn’t have a soul? I’m a natural-born redhead with countless freckles and very pale skin. How would I know what it felt like to be missing a soul if I’d been that way my entire life? At the ripe old age of 18, I thought I was beyond bullying; in that moment, I realized I was not. When the bullying became too intense, I sought out a hairdresser to change my red color to *anything* else. I went to three

different salons before giving up entirely: “your color is too rare, you can’t dye it. No one will do it.” They were right, no one did.

In my undergraduate studies, I had men (boys) approach me and make comments along the lines of, “ooh, you’re a *redhead*,” followed by a wink or smirk, alluding to the stereotypes that redheaded women are wild, particularly in the bedroom. At the time, there was a series of popular memes circulating on social media about the difference between a “Ginger” and a “Redhead”: the “Ginger” was portrayed as a frizzy-haired, freckle-faced kid with reddish-orange hair; the “Redhead” was a woman with long, dark red hair and an hourglass figure. I was always intrigued by this paradox: how does one go from being the “Ginger” in high school, outcast from social groups and certainly popularity, to a wild sex icon, seemingly overnight? It didn’t make sense, but I somehow knew that as a redheaded woman, I was a sort of ugly duckling: my “time” was not in high school, but it was coming. . . .

Or so I was told. What actually came was a shared idea around me that redheaded white women were to be desired—that they possessed sexual prowess, and always wore black leather (think Marvel’s *Black Widow*). Redheaded women, supposedly, are exotic. My “time” meant that I transitioned from being an object of mockery to an object of desire. A new meme started circulating: a warning that you should never date a girl in her “redhead phase.” The mixed messages were confusing. My whole life is, apparently, a redhead phase.

Naturally, I began to obsess over redheaded characters. It was hard to miss, for example, Disney’s Merida from *Brave* in 2012. Merida has an unrealistic number of hair

strands to create her signature look: long, orange, out-of-control curls. She reminded me of the original orphan Annie, one of my childhood idols. Both Merida and Annie are similar in their bold, unruly dispositions (the early signs of a true redheaded woman). Though Merida is certainly considered a Disney princess, she lacks the cliché, princess-y qualities possessed by Aurora, Cinderella, and Snow White. The same holds true for Ariel, the little mermaid. These redheads, though adored, are outspoken. Many online message boards have described them as wild, stubborn, and boyish. Neither princess has a particularly great relationship with her parents, and both seek out a witch to get what they want. However, whenever I tried to point this out to my friends and family, they brushed me aside and told me I was reading too much into it.

In 2016, I had the opportunity to visit The Louvre in Paris. I was shocked to discover how many paintings there were of beautiful, red-haired, pale-skinned European women, usually nude and seductively posed amid trees, or bed sheets. Considering the small percentage of redheads that actually exist, I couldn't believe how many depictions there were. I spent hours admiring this art, and I couldn't help but think of all the hairdressers who called my hair beautiful and rare: these paintings of women portrayed red hair as beautiful, but it certainly wasn't rare in this museum full of so-called "high art." After a while, however, I began to feel the stares of strangers in the room. Before I realized it, all of the men were staring at me, a woman alone in The Louvre, in a room full of artwork depicting nude, redheaded white women. It suddenly felt more like a fetish than art. I couldn't leave the room fast enough.

According to Grant McCracken, author of *Big Hair: A Journey into the Transformation of Self*, “there are just enough [redheads] that they cannot be classified as freaks, but so few of them that we never really get used to them . . . as it is, redheads are too numerous to be ignored and too rare to be accepted” (102). Redheads comprise an estimated 1-2% of the global population—as McCracken says, not quite freaks, but certainly unable to blend in. The older I got, the more I paid attention to the red-haired characters in fiction, film, and other media. Most often, these characters were either the villain (possibly sexy, possibly not) or the frizzy-haired nerd: adored, maybe, but certainly not sexy or heroic. But why? Where did these limited possibilities for the redhead come from? It was a question I pondered privately for years, but it wasn’t until graduate school that I realized this question was a worthy endeavor for a Master’s project.

In my first graduate-level course, I was handed a syllabus for the introductory class that used the phrase “redheaded stepchild.” I was officially triggered, despite the fact that the professor was a redhead himself. For my first project in the course—an assignment that was designed as a way to practice doing scholarly research—I decided to seek out the history of the phrase “redheaded stepchild.” What I found was a whole lot of nothing. While my scholarly searches did come up with several pages’ worth of articles on the order of, “X, the redheaded step-child of Z”—for example, “Norepinephrine: the Red-Headed Step-Child of Parkinson's Disease”—none of these articles had anything to do with redheads or stepchildren. What this revealed is that the phrase “redheaded stepchild” is not only a linguistic commonplace, but also an *academic* commonplace.

Indeed, after further research, I found that there has been very little academic interest in redheadedness at all. There are a few articles in psychology that consider whether or not red hair is viewed as being attractive (apparently, it is not), but all of these studies are outdated and have not been replicated. There has been more recent research on the science surrounding the MC1R gene, more commonly known (albeit inaccurately) as the “redhead gene.” Such research is interested in the relationship between the phenotypic portrayal of red hair and pain tolerance and/or the effectiveness of anesthesia. On average, redheads require 20% more anesthesia than their non-red counterparts—an experience that I myself am quite familiar with. However, such work does little to reveal the socio-cultural meaning of red hair. Two books geared for a popular audience—Marion Roach’s *The Roots of Desire: The Myth, Meaning, and Sexual Power of Red Hair* and Jacky Colliss Harvey’s *Red: A History of the Redhead*—trace various myths that have circulated (and continue to circulate) in the West about redheads in an attempt to better understand what red hair has symbolized, historically and in the present moment. These books serve as the groundwork for several student theses, which I will discuss in greater depth below. The most notable work about redheadedness, however, is perhaps Donica O’Malley’s award-winning 2019 PhD dissertation, *From Redhead to Ginger: Othering Whiteness in New Media*, which takes the most comprehensive look at the identity of the Ginger as it has been constructed on the internet, from *South Park*’s “Ginger Kids” episode in 2005 to the present moment. More significantly, O’Malley dissects what she calls the “Ginger phenomenon”—the explosion of the Ginger meme on

the internet—and how the stereotype of the Ginger works to “make whiteness strange, revealing both its particularity and limitedness” (3).

This modest body of scholarship seeks to understand various facets of redheadedness. What it largely ignores, however, is how such facets affect actual people with red hair; that is, how the tropes and stereotypes about red hair become embodied in actual red-haired individuals. By not simply tracing the stereotypes, tropes, or cultural codes that red hair has been associated with, but instead by focusing on *how* these stereotypes, tropes, or cultural codes become internalized, my project seeks to shed light on how red hair plays a role in identity construction and performance. Red hair is not something that exists only on stage, in myths, or on the internet, which is what most of the previous work has focused on. Rather, red hair is a negatively connotated phenotypic marker that, I argue, needs to be studied in the context of identity formation.

Thus, one question driving my project is: how do stereotypes about redheads affect the identities that redheads assume? This question is two-fold: I am concerned both with how these tropes lead to the way that redheads are identified by other people (namely, as “the Ginger” or “the Redhead”) and how they lead to people with red hair internalizing and performing these identities. How, that is, do the tropes of redheadedness that others have already traced and/or taxonomized not only produce and participate in the construction of a very public (albeit malleable) social identity category, but also: How do they become embodied and internalized, as evidenced by specific identity performances? By “identity performance,” I am, of course, echoing Judith Butler’s ideas about the performative nature of gender and identity. But in this instance, I am using

“identity performance” to refer more particularly to the texts in which several specific people—a documentary filmmaker, authors, and a comedian—have created an identity to perform for a public audience and, in doing so, reveal the way that tropes about redheadedness can be internalized.

Scope and Limitations

Red hair is not unique to any one race/ethnicity. There have been many discourses of redheadedness throughout history, including some that are specific to Jewish people, Arab people, and people of the African diaspora. In this project, however, I will focus on “Redhead” and “Ginger” tropes that pertain to people of European descent. I do so not to further normalize the idea that all redheads are white, but rather to analyze the ways in which discourse about white redheads is used to police boundaries of a heteronormative, dominant whiteness.

While the term “Ginger” has been used to refer generally to white people with red hair for centuries, its most widely understood usage today was made popular by the long-running animated series *South Park* in its 2005 “Ginger Kids” episode. This episode sought to satirize racial bigotry, with “Ginger” acting as a proxy for other, cruder racial stereotypes. But several factors, not least the show’s tendency towards self-canceling irony, undercut its ostensible aims and led to even cruder reifications of the Ginger figure in modern society, with often dire material consequences for red-haired people (especially children)¹. In *South Park*’s wake, the Ginger stereotype has become

¹ See, for example, Jeffery Andrew Weinstock’s *Taking South Park Seriously*.

particularly prevalent in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. For the purposes of my project, then, when I refer to “redheads” from here on out, I am referring to white redheads in Anglophone countries who fit the *South Park* vision of the Ginger: red hair, freckles, light eyes, and excessively pale skin. Following Donica O’Malley, I will also analyze Gingers and Redheads as two different tropes. O’Malley differentiates the terms as follows: “the ‘ginger,’ or person (most often male) with red hair, light skin, and freckles, is a nerdy, despicable figure, positioned socially beneath even that of the internet troll,” while the “redhead” refers to “someone who is either sexualized or deemed part of the attractive side of the spectrum of red hair phenotypes” (19). (Often, such people are referred to as having “auburn” hair rather than “red.”) In general, then, the red-haired male is decidedly “Ginger” while the “Redhead” persona is only available to females, though this persona is certainly not guaranteed for women in all contexts.

With regard to the gendering of the Ginger and Redhead tropes, O’Malley adds one further caveat:

though it is possible to think of the ginger phenomenon as a flipping of androcentrism, wherein redheaded women are the more powerful group, it is a limited kind of power afforded to women through their sexuality. It is better, therefore, to conceive of redheaded men and women as being subjected to different kinds of feminization or emasculation, wherein men are portrayed as weak, and women as only having value with regards to their sexuality, and thus *both* groups are Othered. (83)

Thus, in this project, when I refer to the Ginger, I allude to the stereotypical representation of a white person, usually male, who has red hair and pale skin and is considered meek and disgusting. When I refer to the Redhead, I am talking about the bold, hyper-sexualized white female with red hair. When I wish to refer more generally to white people with red hair, I will use the gender-neutral terms “redheads” (lower-case) or “red-haired people.”

AIMS AND METHODS

The broadest goal of my project is to examine how the discourse of redheadedness informs the identities that redheaded people both assume and have imposed upon them. More specifically, I intend to analyze how such discursive stereotypes inform personal narratives by and about redheads for public audiences using principles of “rhetorical listening,” a methodology associated with feminist rhetorician Krista Ratcliffe. Most of the existing popular writing about redheadedness traces the origins and evolution of myths and stereotypes about red hair in Western art, literature, folklore, and popular media. The small body of extant scholarly literature in the humanities, meanwhile, is primarily concerned with exploring how red hair has been used in specific ways on television or in social media to further solidify myths and stereotypes about redheaded men and women. This work, however, does little to consider how such stereotypes have lasting effects in the real world. Cultural studies scholar Donica O’Malley makes a quantum leap by analyzing the figure of the Ginger in an effort to make whiteness “strange,” exploring the ways in which the Ginger stereotype is used to police racial boundaries and protect hierarchies of whiteness. I expand upon her project by performing an analysis that helps us to better understand how redhead-related stereotypes are actively assumed or rejected in the personal narratives of redheaded writers and performers, focusing on instances of identification or disidentification with redhead-related stereotypes in several selected texts. Specifically, I will examine filmmaker Scott P. Harris and his documentary *Being Ginger*, popular authors Marion Roach and Jacky Colliss Harvey, who have both written about the Redhead trope, and

Australian comedian Tim Minchin's satirical song "Prejudice." Using rhetorical listening, I will show how these particular narratives represent a variety of internalizations of redhead-related tropes, revealing how these individuals negotiate the intersection of their red hair and its negative and/or hypersexualized connotations in their public narratives. Because the creators of these texts are familiar with discourse around redheadedness, it is important to analyze the ways in which they further perpetuate tropes about redheads while simultaneously reinforcing the boundaries of whiteness, thus revealing the subtle complexities behind these tropes. Finally, I will consider how my analysis of these identity performances suggests ramifications for how redheaded people in general can understand and negotiate the discourse of redheadedness and its real-world effects.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The key frameworks that I rely on when grappling with the discourse of redheadedness are theories of whiteness, embodied tropes, and rhetorical listening, with specific focus (in regard to the latter) on instances of identification and disidentification. In this section, I explain how these frameworks enable me to analyze the way that tropes about redheads become embodied in personal narratives about redheadedness.

Critical Whiteness Studies

In Western discourse, red hair and the use of red wigs have a long history of signifying various racial others, including Jewish people in medieval and Renaissance plays, Vikings and other “barbarians” in European histories and fictions, and Irish immigrants in the United States. I will review the history of Western ambivalence towards red-haired people in greater depth below, but I believe it is critical to use whiteness as a lens in order to elucidate the role that such ambivalence has played in the historical construction of whiteness. According to O’Malley, the Ginger figure, with its “excessively” pale white skin, works in subtle ways to police the boundaries of a “normal,” dominant whiteness. With O’Malley in mind, I draw on critical whiteness studies to understand further how redheadedness is racialized, with the aim of making whiteness strange and therefore revealing its constructed nature that is so often taken for granted.

In *Whiteness: An Introduction*, Steve Garner writes that “as much as anything, [whiteness] is a lens through which particular aspects of social relationships can be

apprehended” (1). Drawing from several other scholars in the fields of whiteness studies and cultural studies, Garner makes clear the fact that whiteness is a constructed racial identity that “exists only in so far as other racialized identities, such as blackness, Asianness, etc., exist” (2). Thus, employing whiteness as an analytical perspective allows for the closer examination of social relationships, including relationships of power, exclusion, and belonging. My perspective on the role that redheadedness plays in such relationships is informed by Donica O’Malley’s argument that redheads are a “pseudoracialized other,” a term she derives from Paul Gilroy’s conception of race formation, wherein “phenotypic variations are transformed into ‘concrete systems of differentiation based on ‘race’ and ‘colour’ through appeals to ‘spurious biological theory’” (196). However, says O’Malley, redheads are only *pseudoracialized* because the second step in the process of race formation “is the organization of races into politics” (196), and people with red hair are not systematically oppressed; thus, “because gingers are still hailed as white and given the structural and institutional benefit of whiteness, the second half of racial formation does not apply to them” (196).

It is equally important to examine redhead discourse through a lens of whiteness, I believe, in order to avoid producing work that might “[bestow] legitimacy on groups proclaiming either white supremacy or white victimhood . . . or both simultaneously” (Garner 8). For example, arguments about Gingerism that frame such discrimination as being on par with racism clearly do not use the perspective of whiteness as a lens. Again: as *pseudoracialized* Others, Gingers are still guaranteed their status as white, and are therefore free of any systemic racial discrimination or oppression. However, this does not

render Gingerism as unworthy of study. Redheads symbolize a type of “marked” whiteness, and such stigmatizations have material effects for redheaded individuals and their identity constructions, as well as for the discourse of whiteness. Because whiteness “sustains itself by appearing not to be there” (Garner 35), it is important to recognize which white anxieties (as well as fears about whiteness being denaturalized) are being projected onto stereotypes about white redheads—namely, anxieties about weakness and disgustingness in men and hypersexuality and wantonness in women. Thus, by projecting these fears/anxieties onto the Ginger/Redhead, a dominant, heteronormative whiteness is reinforced, even as these tropes are negatively taken up in the identity construction of redheaded individuals. In conducting my analysis, I hold in mind the acknowledgment that “whiteness has two simultaneous borders: one between white and Other and the second separating grades of whiteness. Over-emphasis on the latter is problematic. In zooming in on the distinctions at that end, the overarching frame goes out of focus” (Garner 10). The goal of my project’s use of whiteness as a lens, then, is to highlight *one* of the many ways that whiteness seeks to maintain its power in often subtle ways, as is the case with the “excessively white” Ginger figure. Drawing again from Richard Dyer, Garner asserts that “white is the framing position: a dominant and normative space against which difference is measured . . . white is the point from which judgements are made, about normality and abnormality, beauty and ugliness, civilisation and barbarity” (34). By looking at what has been traditionally considered abnormal and barbaric (as redheads have very often been portrayed), we are able to better see the way that

whiteness works to maintain its power and police heteronormative, hegemonic, whiteness through various Others, including the Redhead/Ginger.

Embodied Trope and Stereotype

Before analyzing the ways in which an individual identifies or disidentifies with various tropes about redheads, it is important to understand how tropes/stereotypes become “embodied.” Philosopher Edmund Husserl reimagined the Cartesian perspective of the body and mind being separate and instead proposed the idea that it is not only cognition that allows us to think and experience, but also our bodies, which orient us to and in the world. More recently, the idea of embodiment has been expanded to foreground the ways that gender, racialization, and social standing also affect the embodied existence. It is through embodied experience that we are able to individuate subjects/objects. Red hair, which stands out due to its relatively rare occurrence, automatically signifies meaning to the viewer because of long-standing connotations attached to this color. Furthermore, its rarity seems to suggest to others that they have the right to reach out and touch it without permission, especially when such coloring is on a female body. This is merely one common occurrence that makes being a redhead an embodied experience. Jacky Colliss Harvey offers an example of this in her book *Red: A History of the Redhead*:

growing up as a redhead, it sometimes felt as if the last person my red hair belonged to was me—the person from whose scalp it sprang . . . the hair overpowers everything else. It becomes all people see. The normal barrier, the

invisible area around us that we all own, and into which others do not enter without our permissions, apparently doesn't exist if your hair is red. (177)

Harvey goes on to explain that people will “talk about and comment upon your hair while you yourself are standing there beneath it” (178), comparing the experience to wearing a type of hat. If a redhead gets tired of such commentary, Harvey continues, and decides to dye their hair another color, “there is outrage, as if the thing you had changed was everyone else's property, which you have damaged, willfully” (178). Having red hair, then, is an embodied experience. Because of this, it is impossible to disconnect red hair from one's earliest comprehension of one's identity: as Harvey acknowledged, red hair is an extension of one's body, not merely a changeable hat.

As people with red hair get older, the embodied experience of being a redhead extends beyond such physical experiences into the embodiment of socially-created tropes and stereotypes about redheads. Defining a trope as a figure of speech that “influence[s] signification, or how meanings are made within discourse(s)” (111), Ratcliffe consistently emphasizes how tropes can become embodied through socialization: “although distinguishing between bodies and tropes is important, it is equally important to understand how tropes, such as gender and whiteness, become embodied in people via socialization and also how people may (to some degree) resist this socialization” (156).

Put another way, embodied tropes can result from what Stuart Hall refers to as cultural codes—that is, the socially-created meanings and concepts that we represent with words and, in turn, unconsciously internalize. In the textbook *Representation*, Hall defines stereotyping as a particularly reductive sort of signifying practice. While

typifying is considered essential to the production of meaning, stereotypes “get *hold of* the few ‘simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized’ characteristics about a person, *reduce* everything about the person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them” (Hall 247). Stereotyping, Hall continues, quoting Richard Dyer, “deploys a strategy of ‘splitting’. It divides the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable” (247). Thus, by studying the use of redhead-related stereotypes, I, like O’Malley, can use the Ginger figure to deconstruct whiteness and make visible its constructed nature, including the creation of “normal and acceptable” and “abnormal and unacceptable” forms of whiteness. In this project, then, I consider the stereotyping of redheads in terms of the essentializing nature of stereotypes, and the way that such representations work to maintain a very specific hierarchy of whiteness.

Rhetorical Listening: Identification and Disidentification

Using Ratcliffe’s method of rhetorical listening is useful for analyzing the way that tropes/stereotypes about redheads intersect with identity performances for public audiences. In *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, Ratcliffe proposes rhetorical listening as a mode of cross-cultural communication, defined as a “stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text or culture” (17). Taking this stance of openness (rather than a stance of defensiveness), rhetorical listening allows one to “hear” an individual’s intersecting identifications with gender and race, including whiteness, with “the purpose being to negotiate troubled identifications—those identifications that are troubled by history, uneven power dynamics, and

ignorance—in order to facilitate cross-cultural communication about any topic” (Ratcliffe 17). In *Whiteness: An Introduction*, Garner reminds us that “you reveal your own values when describing (or more accurately ascribing) those of other people. The role of social scientists is to listen to this, and the invisibility (or ‘inaudibility,’ to pursue this imagery more faithfully) of whiteness dissolves” (44). By employing rhetorical listening to interrogate redheaded tropes, then, I hope to make more visible the role of redhead discourse in supporting the cultural codes of whiteness.

Rhetorical listening is primarily concerned with *conscious* identifications that people make, both of themselves and of others, because these identifications are where we make choices. Drawing from Diana Fuss and Kenneth Burke, Ratcliffe offers extended definitions of identification and disidentification which, she argues, offer spaces to listen rhetorically. Ratcliffe explains that “identification is inextricably linked with identity but does not directly correspond to it. In other words, although an identification may inform a person’s identity, a person’s identity cannot be reduced to a single identification” (51). In European and US contexts, redheaded people are identified by others in two specific ways to which I would like to pay special attention: as Gingers, who are usually men and are presented as being weak, nerdy, or disgusting, or as Redheads, who are usually women and are either hypersexualized or (less commonly) defeminized. Such (gendered and implicitly racialized) identifications work to reduce the identity of a person to a single identification within a white racialized and imposed binary gender system, and that identification is hair color. I will use Ratcliffe’s definitions of

identification and disidentification in order to make clear the way that red-related stereotypes intersect with the identity of redheads.

Ratcliffe writes that “identification is, from the beginning, a question of relation, of self to other, subject to object, inside to outside” (61). She notes that while the modernist approach to identity foregrounds personal agency and commonalities while deemphasizing differences, postmodern theorists foreground differences while backgrounding personal agency and/or commonalities. It is in this gap between the modern and postmodern perspectives of identity that Ratcliffe argues rhetorical listening can work to foster understanding, focusing primarily on the *conscious* identifications that one does have control over and accepting *both* commonalities and differences. For Ratcliffe, it is also critical to distinguish between *identification* and *identity*, for identity cannot be reduced to a single identification: “when people’s identities are interpreted as identical in terms of a single identification . . . or in terms of a single cultural category . . . then opportunities for stereotyping abound” (51). In considering the way that redheads enact or reject the identity of the Ginger/Redhead stereotype, then, rhetorical listening creates space to reveal how socially-created *identifications* affect the personal narratives about redheadedness from people with red hair.

Disidentification is equally important when it comes to identity construction. Ratcliffe, quoting Fuss, defines disidentification as “an identification that is not so much ‘refused’ as ‘disavowed’ . . . in other words, a disidentification is ‘an identification that has already been made and denied in the unconscious’” (62). Identities contain *both* identifications and disidentifications, since an individual may either claim or reject an

identification (with or without reason). Many redheads attempt to disidentify with various stereotypes related to having red hair, whether via the disavowal of the negatively-connotated and yet socially-accepted term “Ginger,” or via the literal dying of their hair to change its color. At other times, female redheads, for example, may embrace the Redhead stereotype of being wild and sexual. What is important to bear in mind with this term is that disidentification is only possible if previous identifications (i.e., stereotypes) exist, regardless of how true such identifications might be. Ratcliffe writes, “the interplay of identification and disidentification constructs a place of differences where rhetorical exchanges, such as cross-cultural communication, may concur . . . a place where these exchanges may result in genuine understanding, not patronizing acceptance or silent resistance” (63). In looking at the way that the Ginger or Redhead stereotype is either identified with or disidentified with in personal narratives via rhetorical listening, I hope to reveal the way that such tropes become internalized.

One benefit of using rhetorical listening in an analysis of redhead-related tropes is its facility in combating a rhetoric of *dysfunctional silence*. Dysfunctional silence, according to Ratcliffe, “results from and perpetuates a differend, or discursive disconnect, between interlocutors (whether people or institutions) who occupy competing cultural logics about how gender and race intersect” (79). In this case, the dysfunctional silence exists when tropes about redheads are brushed off as harmless or amusing in public discourses and personal interactions. A rhetoric of dysfunctional silence functions in four ways: 1) by either accepting or rejecting negatively resonating terms (e.g., the term Ginger or the phrase “beat him like a redheaded stepchild”) without critique ; 2) by using

a “binary” cultural logic that “masks coexisting commonalities and differences” and/or “discourages simultaneous imaginings of commonalities and differences,” relying on either/or, all-or-nothing logic (Ratcliffe 88); 3) by taking the (dysfunctional) rhetorical stances of denial, defensiveness, and guilt/blame; and 4) by reading metaphorically, assuming that “one member of a group represents . . . all other members” (Ratcliffe 92). Ratcliffe argues that such instances of dysfunctional silence lead to “lost opportunities . . . an absence of claims about the commonality-difference debate and an absence of viable tactics for communicating across all differences” (93). Specifically, this analysis works to combat such dysfunctional silences around the meaning of redheadedness by investigating the negatively resonating term “Ginger” and highlighting the commonalities and differences that the construction of the Ginger figure shares with other techniques used to normalize whiteness, rejecting the defense/denial logics that are often relied on when talking about whiteness. Studying the creation, use, and effects of redhead-related tropes by rejecting the functions of dysfunctional silence via rhetorical listening allows for the revelation for a few of the many ways that whiteness attempts to maintain its power while also making visible the ways in which these stereotypes intersect with the personal narratives of people with red hair.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The inspiration for this project came from my own experiences as a redhead, which seems to be the case for all of the works that I discuss in this section. (It seems, that is, that the only people who have written about redheads/redheadedness are people who have red hair themselves, with the exception of the authors of a few psychological studies about hair color preferences generally.) In what follows, I offer a review of the minimal work that has been published about redheads, seemingly *for* redheads, by redheads alone.

In order to analyze how tropes about redheads get internalized, it's necessary first to understand the myths, meanings, and stereotypes associated with redheads, both historically and in the present moment. However, there has been surprisingly little attention given to redheadedness, especially in the academic world. In what follows, then, I survey three main types of work: selected psychological studies from the 1970s and 80s, works for a general audience that attempt to trace the myths and meanings of red hair in Western folklore and popular culture, and Donica O'Malley's recent dissertation, the first scholarly work to analyze the discourse of redheadedness from a Cultural Studies perspective.

Early Research: Psychology

The bulk of the published academic work about redheads exists in the discipline of psychology, with a focus on whether or not white redheads are considered "attractive" by other white people. I review the following studies in order to provide context for

present-day claims about innate aversion to redheadedness as well as to reveal the backdrop for current attitudes towards redheads.

The first study on hair color preferences was published in 1971. In “Hair Color, Personality, and the Observer,” E. D. Lawson used semantic differential scales in order to investigate which stereotypes are associated with various hair colors, writing that “hair color, while certainly one important aspect of body image and the object of much popular conjecture, does not seem to have been extensively studied” (312). While Lawson’s research suggested that dark hair was preferred on men while blond hair was preferred on women, what is most pertinent to my research are the words that were associated with redheads of both genders: “unemotional,” “rugged,” and “strong-willed,” to name the top few. Though Lawson was primarily focused on the perspectives of external beholders, he did acknowledge the way that one’s hair color may affect one’s own understanding of identity: “if the contention is accepted that the individual’s self-image is affected by the personality characteristics that he associates with a given hair color, then the identification of these traits can lead to better understanding of the individual’s self-concept” (312). While this could be a positive thing for those with hair colors that are deemed preferable and attractive, this could prove harmful to those at the bottom, the redheads.

A few years later, in 1978, Saul Feinman and George W. Gill published “Sex Differences in Physical Attractiveness Preferences,” which focused primarily on stereotypic beliefs about various hair colorings. The student-subjects in this study were given questionnaires that charted the likes and dislikes of white students based on eye

color, hair color, and complexion of the opposite sex. The responses in this study were restricted to white respondents due to the very small number of people of color respondents available at the University of Wyoming, where the study was conducted.

What the two men observed was the existence of female preference of dark hair on men, and male preference of light hair on women—a conclusion in line with Lawson's.

However, unlike Lawson, Feinman and Gill note that the discovery of the strong distaste for redheads by both sexes deserves particular consideration. The researchers write that

the most striking features of the responses to hair color are the very low percentage of respondents who prefer red hair color (7% of male choices and 2% of female choices), and the predominance of disliking of redheads (82% of male dislikes and 84% of female dislikes). Why is there such a tremendous aversion to redheads? It may simply be that people need to dislike some hair color, and red, being relatively infrequent in the population, was perceived aversively. Possibly, there are negative stereotypes associated with red hair color. It would be interesting to investigate the actual selection experiences of redheads to see if the responses expressed in these data are put into action. Regardless of explanation, the finding that one particular hair color is so strongly disliked by both sexes is striking and deserves further consideration in the future research. (50)

Indeed, this dislike of redheads and the “possibility” of negative stereotypes *was* deserving of more research, which Dennis E. Clayson and Micol R. C. Maughan provided almost ten years later, in 1986.

Clayson and Maughan's study, "Redheads and Blondes: Stereotypic Images," looked specifically at the traits and characteristics that were attributed to blonds and redheads. The researchers acknowledged that hair color "has been associated symbolically with personal attributes, but the pattern appears to be mixed" (811), both for blonds and for redheads. For example, they offer a list of the mixed possibilities for redheads and blonds:

clowns, Howdy Doody, Lucille Ball, Red Skeleton, Red Buttons, and probably Judas Iscariot had/have red hair. Marilyn Monroe, Jessica Lange, and Steve Canyon are blonds. But then, Ramses II, Cleopatra, Queen Elizabeth, and Thomas Jefferson, as well as Ann Margaret (occasionally) were redheads and Hitler was particularly fond of blonds. (811)

The goal of this research was to answer Feinman and Gill's aforementioned question: why is there such a tremendous aversion to redheads?

Like the previous two studies, this work was focused on white students. But what Clayson and Maughan's data more clearly revealed was the gendered nature of redheaded stereotypes, where red-haired females are viewed as being competent (despite their perceived unattractiveness) while the male redheads were rated negatively in every research area. Similarly, their subjects' responses overwhelmingly suggested that redheaded females were not considered feminine while their male counterparts were, which is a theme that certainly persists today. These researchers concluded that "redheaded women were seen as a relatively more powerful professional type, rather nonsense and not physically attractive" (814-15). Their blond counterparts were

stereotyped as “beautiful,” “pleasant,” “pleasing,” and “extremely feminine.” As for the men, the blonds were seen as “strong,” “active,” “pleasant,” “successful,” and “good-looking,” while the redheads had a “surprisingly” negative stereotype, being seen as “very unattractive,” “less successful,” and “rather effeminate, with less potency than even the redheaded woman” (814-15). Clayson and Maughan speculate about where such harsh associations came from—perhaps the color red is linked to negative connotations, or “perhaps a person may simply not be that attractive with very light skin, no tan, and freckles, combined with an unusual hair color” (816). They close with a sense of false optimism, noting that “redheads can take solace, however, from knowing that red hair comes in and out of fashion” (816).

Although these studies were primarily interested in perceived attractiveness and in stereotypes and personality traits associated with hair color, their findings nevertheless elucidated negative attitudes that already existed around white people with red hair, at least in the US context. To better understand where such negative feelings come from, however, we must look to other sources. As Feinman and Gill hypothesized, stereotypes can be considered “popular beliefs and hypotheses” and therefore “we might find popular culture, everyday experience, and media images to be rich sources of stereotyped expressions” (44). Such sources are where several popular authors have looked to explore the myth and meaning of red hair.

Tracing the Myths, Meanings, and Stereotypes Behind Red Hair

Marion Roach and Jacky Colliss Harvey summarized where myths and meanings associated with red hair came from. Their works offer a mix of personal life writing and historical survey for popular readership and, in the absence of any other reliable sources, these works served as references for a handful of academic studies in the humanities on the cultural meaning of red hair. Several students, in partial fulfillment of MA and BA degrees, draw from these two books to further understand specific aspects of redheadedness. I review this body of work in order to synthesize the findings about where redhead-related myths come from, which will lead into a review of Donica O'Malley's groundbreaking dissertation on how the modern iteration of the Ginger figure works to police boundaries of whiteness.

In 2005, “memoir coach” and journalist Marion Roach set out to gain insight into popular understandings of redheads in her book *The Roots of Desire: The Myth, Meaning, and Sexual Power of Red Hair*. This book is broken up into three sections as she looks at three particular aspect of redheadedness: myths about redheads as “Wild, Oversexed Heathens, Banshees, and Queens” (9); the science behind the idea of the “redhead gene”; and the ways in which red hair signifies differently for males and females.

In order to trace the myths that exist about redheads, Roach looks to literature, art, and religion, highlighting some of the most famous (or, rather, infamous) redheads from a variety of historical, geographical, and cultural contexts: Lilith, who many believe was Adam's first wife—one who “refused to lie beneath him” and thus was banished to the Red Sea, “a place known to harbor ‘lascivious demons’” (23); Boudicca, a British

Monarch who is remembered for her courageous attempt to overthrow the Roman Empire in the C.E. 60s and has been described as being “huge of frame, terrifying of aspect, and with a harsh voice. A great mass of bright red hair fell to her knees” (Dio Cassius via Roach 30); Elizabeth I; Set(h), the Egyptian “god of chaos, confusion, storms, winds, the desert, and foreign lands” (36); Judas Iscariot, who, according to Jean-Baptist Thiers, is the reason “everyone stands in horror about red hair” (37); and Cain, the original murderer in the Old Testament. It is in this initial listing of well-known male and female redheads that Roach begins to highlight the gendered nature of redheaded stereotypes, pointing out that “while Lilith was evil through her powers of seduction, it was those powers that also gave her a highly sexualized identity, even at the height of her ancient ability to provoke fear” (35). The same holds true, says Roach, for Boudicca. She also looks to Shakespeare to consider how red wigs were used to portray characters in a certain light: Orlando, from *As You Like It*, whose hair is “something browner than Judas’s” (40), and Shylock, from *The Merchant of Venice*, the stereotypically vicious and usurious Jew. Roach makes it clear that these redhead-related stereotypes did not originate with Shakespeare: if he had invented them, “no one would have recognized the symbolism, understood the identity of the character, and applied the stereotypes needed to follow the plot. So, Shakespeare laid his hands on what had gone before him” (40). What Roach finds, however, is that there is no clear point of origin for such stereotypes.

In the second section, Roach reviews the Mendelian genetics behind red hair, but ends by focusing on the racist chauvinism of her English grandfather, whose “greatest venom was reserved for the Irish, who, fleeing the poverty of their own land, had been

hurled in huge numbers into his English hometown on the Irish Sea” (106-7). It was this grandfather who passed on to her some of the worst stereotypes about redheads. “In hindsight,” she concludes, “it appears that when with one hand Charles Darwin provided us with the science to understand our common humanity, with the other he handed us a whip with which to flail anyone who looked unlike ourselves” (106). Though the term “survival of the fittest” was falsely attributed to Darwin (it was coined by leading eugenicist Herbert Spencer), it is Darwin who suggested that certain traits are the results of genetic “mutations,” a negative word with the potential to legitimize the creation of the “Other.” The rueful lesson here, as Roach sees it, is that attitudes towards red hair are passed down almost like the genes for red hair: “I had no say in my genetic inheritance and . . . no say in how my hair color may be perceived by the casual observer” (122)—or even, it seems, by her own family.

In the final section of her book, Roach addresses how redheaded stereotypes vary dramatically for males and females: “on Satan the color red is one thing; on women, it is altogether another” (157). However, Roach primarily focuses on the perceived sex appeal of red hair on women. She begins by quoting Herve St. Louis, a Canadian comics scholar, who explains that in comics, cartoons, and children’s books, “all the kick-ass girls have red hair . . . whenever it is an independent girl, not a sidekick person, when she has her own mind, or does as good as the guys, she has red hair” (157). Such characteristics are true for a variety of famous characters: Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*), Jessica Rabbit (*Who Framed Roger Rabbit*), Pippi Longstocking, Josie from *Josie and The Pussycats*—the list goes on and on. Where, Roach wonders at the end of this survey,

did such images come from? Roach traces the gendered redhead “mystique” back through the history of Western pictorial art. Roach cites portrayals of Mary Magdalene as a prime example: Magdalene is a woman who has “ascribed to her the sinful qualities described in Luke as well as the description of the woman from whom seven evil spirits were ejected” and she is painted by Rossetti, Titian, Donatello, and others as being “always enshrouded in her long red hair . . . which nowhere in the Bible is described as red” (161-2). Furthermore, Roach notes that one of the biggest realizations that inspired her book was that Eve is often depicted as blond before the “fall” and as a redhead after—what Roach refers to as “the original scarlet letter” (175). She argues that this phenomenon is used to mark a variety of women in art, including Cassandra and Persephone from Greek mythology. Such women are “represented in ways that do not require that we fully know their tales, but merely that we understand their stories through an association with one attribute: their red hair” (171).

While Roach’s work traces the evolution of the “myth and meaning” of red hair in the West, another popular treatment, Jacky Colliss Harvey’s bestseller *Red: A History of the Redhead* (2015), explores that history by focusing on famous historical redheads. Harvey draws from art, literature, film, and advertising to discuss red hair as a cultural phenomenon, both as it has been in the past and as it is now. Like Roach, Harvey considers well-known redheads (and myths about them) in Western history and popular culture. However, she goes quite a bit deeper, considering, for example, the ways that red hair was used in ancient Greece to describe and identify “barbarians.” Harvey also considers how redheads are “over-represented” in Western art. After examining famous

paintings of redheaded men, Harvey compares red hair on men in medieval art (especially when in combination with a ruddy skin) to the black hat on the “baddie” in a Western—visual shorthand for the “animalistic, unintellectual, unreachable by reason, and all the more frightening for that” (69) type of character. As another example of this, she cites works where Judas, Christ’s betrayer, is represented as a Jewish redhead (a link that she feels will never be undone), never mind the fact that Christ himself, along with all of his apostles, were also Jewish. Furthermore, this connotation of evilness that is attached to redheaded men (and Jewish men in particular) is present even in works where the author is otherwise well-informed about the workings of racism. Harvey notes that Charles Dickens, who she argues “could make as impassioned a case for the dispossessed and the minoritized as any writer before or since,” still gave us the character of Fagin in his 1838 novel *Oliver Twist*, “a very old, shriveled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair” (70). Fagin’s character, Harvey claims, very likely contributed at least as much to the negative associations of red hair on (Jewish) men as the prejudices that gave us red-haired Judas in the first place.

Red hair on women, however, is depicted in dramatically different and more complicated ways. Echoing Roach’s findings, Harvey explains that, in artwork, red hair on women is a thing of beauty, and is often used to portray angels. For instance, the Virgin Mary, “the Queen of Heaven, in all her beauty and divinity” (Harvey 76), is often depicted as a redhead. And then there’s Mary Magdalene, who Harvey analyzes in even greater depth than Roach. According to Harvey, Magdalene is the tearful penitent, rebellious and yet seeking reconciliation— “Magdalene weeps, she feels, she has human

emotion and artists depict her as giving them vent . . . and then there's her sensuality and human passion" (83-4). Using red hair to identify the rebellious, sexual and yet human female that is Mary Magdalene creates confusing and complex connotations for redheaded women. It is not quite the simple connection to evil that Judas's red hair represents for the male redhead.

Harvey moves on from medieval art to consider Elizabethan treatments of redheadedness, which were greatly affected by the red-haired queen—arguably one of the most famous redheaded women of all time. Elizabeth I was no stranger to the power of her hair, Harvey argues. She *chose* red, despite having some sixty-plus wigs of various colors, and the creation of this brand, so to speak, was deliberate. Harvey explains that red hair (and the closely associated pale-white skin) were more popular in England during Elizabeth's reign than at any time up until our own. In an attempt to emulate her look, and therefore associate with the ruling class, men had the option of dyeing their beards while women could color their hair with tinctures made from rhubarb juice or the oil of vitriol, more commonly known as sulphuric acid. As for the pale skin, white lead was used, which Harvey explains, mockingly, is "splendid for giving the skin a satiny white finish, and horribly injurious to health in any degree of contact whatsoever" (98). Going to such extreme measures to maintain the look of the cliché, pale-skinned redhead, Harvey argues, was not only to make a fashion statement: the queen had been declared illegitimate by her father and, therefore, to parade his red hair so prominently was one way of giving the lie to that. Because the gene for red hair is recessive, it is possible that neither of a redhead's parents will display red hair themselves; however, this association

further empowered Elizabeth I, and thus the lethal measures she took in order to maintain her famous look secured her personal power and further solidified the powerful image of the redheaded woman.

Harvey pays special attention to the ethereal redheads depicted by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the mid-1800s, concluding that these famous Pre-Raphaelite paintings contributed to many enduring stereotypes about redheaded women. Furthermore, Harvey believes that the models, in addition to the artworks they inspired, contributed to many of today's connotations and beliefs about redheaded women. At the time Rossetti was working, Harvey explains, models were traditionally regarded "as little better than prostitutes" (117). However, during the nineteenth century, models' names also began to matter, as did the stories that circulated about them. Rossetti's models—Lizzie Siddal, Fanny Cornforth, Alice Wilding, and Joanna Hiffernan—are important because they represented risqué women, both in their public personas and the way they were painted and portrayed in Rossetti's art. For example, Joanna Hiffernan was known to be unconventional and daring in both her professional life and her personal life, which worked to solidify the qualities associated with redheaded women. Furthermore, these famous redheaded models lead to what Harvey calls "a Pre-Raphaelite fetish for redheads," with Rossetti being the classic example of a "man with a thing for redheads" (121). Eroticizing these models, Harvey concludes, was intended to both draw and please the eye, and their paintings created a template for depictions of the "sensuous redhead" that persist in advertising, film, and pornography today.

Both Roach and Harvey laid the groundwork for understanding how red hair functions symbolically in contemporary culture by tracing the myths, legends, and stereotypes about redheads that have developed and changed over time, and their work serves as important sources for three student theses written over the past decade. Sarah Kate Anderson's "The Fuel that Fans the Fire: Towards an Understanding of Redheads as Signifiers in Western Theatre" (MA Thesis, San Jose State University, 2013) carefully charts the history of the use of red hair (or, more often, red wigs) in theatre, from Shakespeare's "red Jews," clowns, and villains to the roles of glamorized celebrities, like Sarah Bernhardt, who used her hair as a justification for behaving more wildly than was prescribed for turn-of-the-century French women. According to Anderson, the redhead is "an intense, paradoxical binary: both impassioned attraction and impassioned repulsion are consistently associated with red hair" (1). Anderson considers whether or not red hair influences the audience's understanding, as it is not specifically mentioned in the "Non-Traditional Casting Project, a non-profit advocacy organization . . . formed to ensure equal opportunity for minorities or 'others' in the theatre" (4). What Anderson found is that redheads on the stage always signify *something* because the audience comes with their own preconceived ideas and connotations about redheads. Thus, she considers the ways that redheaded women and redheaded men are given different possibilities when it comes to identity. Anderson's work further reveals the gender binary that exists for redheaded men and women. Anderson found that redheaded women have the option of being the "temptress" or the "trickster" (or both, in some situations, as is the case with Lilith). Anderson writes that redheaded women are given "permission to fill the role, and,

in a sense, she performs the symbol [of being redheaded]” (27). Put simply, the hair of a redheaded woman allows her to act wantonly and liberated. Meanwhile, Anderson asserts that redheaded men are “puzzling. Most are white, but as ‘others,’ they are not quite white” (38). Like the women, redheaded men are considered outsiders, but they are almost exclusively cast as the villain or the fool. To support this claim, Anderson discusses several famous plays where the villains (who were often also Jewish) are cast as having a red wig and beard, not unlike many famous clowns, including Ronald McDonald. Portrayals of enslaved people were also demonstrated through the use of a red wig and the characters were described as looking either like Judas or Cain, two famous villains from the bible. One of Anderson’s most interesting findings is that there are contradicting claims about whether or not many of these characters were written as redheads in the original scripts. In her conclusion, she declares that it doesn’t matter either way: “the memory of Western culture says he did [have red hair], and myths without truth can be as telling as provable facts” (42).

Erin Kentch’s “Red Hairing: The History and Myth of Red Hair (MA Project, Corcoran College of Art and Design, 2013) considers the origins of classic redhead tropes and how these tropes reveal the way that discrimination and Othering work from the perspective of anti-redhead stereotypes. The title is a sort of pun: “red herring,” Kentch explains, “is a literary term used to describe a detail that is intentionally misleading” (2). Consequently, she says, “it is appropriate to use the term to highlight how labeling and prejudice are used by others to hide their own fear, insecurity, and ignorance” (2)—that is, to better understand how othering works with respect to redheads. Her project is two-

fold: the first part consists of an imagined interactive art exhibit. This exhibit would allow its viewers to physically walk through different rooms that represented different phases of stereotyping and discrimination that redheads have faced over time, including collections from *I Love Lucy*, news content from specific “Kick a Ginger Day” attacks, and a “hall of mirrors” where visitors will both “see themselves in a mirror, where a digitally altered projection is displaying their image with red hair” then, in a second room, watch a live stream of other visitors “as they grapple with their [new] image” in the hall of mirrors (15).

The second half of her project is a written thesis that explores the history of redheadedness. Kentch’s main argument is that “humans have used stereotyping as a mechanism for dealing with feelings of fear, awe, and that which we don’t understand” (19). She’s rather sympathetic to the human condition and the need to stereotype the “Other,” and uses the history of the redhead to emphasize the consequence of all forms of labeling and stereotyping. She goes on to explain that some of the earliest stories about redheads were those of gods, and that gods with red hair were typically unkind and vindictive, as is the case with Set(h). She also notes that due to a lack of science and medicine, people in the 17th century relied on sympathetic magic and physiognomy (pseudoscience) to make sense of the world. Thus, under sympathetic magic, many Christians deemed red hair as a sign of being “possessed by the Devil because the Devil himself was red and came from the ‘fires of hell’” while, in Aristotle’s time, using physiognomies, the study of the systematic correspondence of psychological characteristics to facial features or body structure, redheads were considered “proud,

deceitful, detracting, vengeful, and full of envy” (21). Kentch highlights Roach’s observations that, “biologically speaking, red ‘enhances the viewer’s metabolism and increases both heart rate and respiration,’ creating a very physical response” (22). Kentch argues that “this all goes back to the idea of identifying the ‘other.’ What seems to get lost is the idea that discrimination against redheads is less offensive than the same treatment toward skin color or sexual orientation” (24).

Kevin O’Regan’s BA Honours thesis in Applied Psychology, “Red Hair in Popular Culture and the Relationship with Anxiety and Depression” (University College [Cork, Ireland], 2014), considers the impact of redhead-targeted bullying and its lasting effects. O’Regan surveyed people from 20 different countries in hopes of better understanding how redheads are viewed. O’Regan’s study found that redheaded women did not appear to have significantly higher levels of anxiety or depression than their non-redheaded counterparts based on the use of the HADS² scale while redheaded men scored significantly higher on anxiety, but not depression. O’Regan notes, however, that several factors may have influenced these findings, including the limitations of the HADS scale system as well as the high possibility of “tertiary deviance,” where “those labelled as deviants eventually come to accept their label and in a sense reclaim it as a mark of pride, turning what was initially a culturally imposed deficit into a benefit to their self esteem later in life” (29). In other words, O’Regan suggests that adopting the “ugly duckling” storyline has helped most redheads recover from childhood and adolescent bullying,

² Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale.

despite its ability to affect individuals for up to 37 years after the bullying encounter. O'Regan supports this theory with a selection of open-ended questions at the end of his survey that allowed the respondents the opportunity to share their specific experiences with bullying or discrimination based on their red hair coloring. Although the study didn't find redheads to be significantly more depressed or anxious than their non-red-haired counterparts, more than 80% of respondents offered several specific instances where they had been victimized, harmed, or otherwise discriminated against for their hair color, both in adolescence and adulthood.

Dissertation: Donica O'Malley

Roach's and Harvey's books, along with the contributions from these three theses, provide close examinations of various aspects of redheads and the myths and stereotypes attached to them. Donica O'Malley's *From Redhead to Ginger* [etc.] (Ph D Dissertation, U of Pittsburgh, 2019) goes beyond simply tracing and unpacking myths to analyzing how the redhead (especially the Ginger figure) works to police certain boundaries of whiteness.

Focusing on the modern iteration of the Ginger figure, O'Malley traces the explosion of Ginger memes online in the past two decades and the ways that the "phenomenon [of the Ginger meme] walks the line between being satire and not" (iv). O'Malley considers the history of prejudice against redheads and early "memefication" of the Ginger figure; the gendered interpretations of Gingers (and how gender plays a role in the reaction of disgust, humor, and desire); the so-called science behind red hair and

how scientific “breakthroughs” only work to pathologize (and thus Other) the redhead; and, finally, the way that redheads have been “pseudoracialized” as a means of protecting whiteness as normative by subtly using whiteness against itself. While redheads used to function as scapegoats for religious-related fears, they now function as scapegoats for white anxieties. She argues that because the power of whiteness relies on being both normative and invisible (to white people), the creation of the Ginger figure works to set boundaries between “normal” whiteness and the Ginger’s “excessive whiteness” without the risk of being labeled as a racist. The result of such boundary-setting, says O’Malley, is the successful policing of white, heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity by casting the Ginger out as Other. Thus,

the ginger meme exposes the contingencies, limits, and constructed nature of whiteness. The ginger figure acts as a scapegoat for anxieties about white heteronormativity. The qualities ascribed to the ginger, namely, weakness, nerdiness, and disgustingness, are those same qualities some white men fear they represent, but with which they do not want to be associated. As such, these qualities are projected onto the ginger’s representation of “excessive whiteness” and thus safely distanced from “normative whiteness.” (O’Malley iv)

While most Ginger memes refer to men who have supposedly been emasculated, O’Malley also considers the way that redheaded women are *either* hypersexualized and fetishized, or fall into the same Ginger stereotypes as their male counterparts. While being hypersexualized may seem like a positive, it is important to realize that being

objectified is no less consequential than the emasculation and degradation of the redheaded man.

O'Malley traces what she calls the online "Ginger phenomenon" to the 2005 *South Park* "Ginger Kids" episode. Many scholars, she says, have suggested that red hair is "merely an 'uncomplicated signifier' that serves as an 'arbitrary' physical difference in an allegory about racialization, generally" (9). O'Malley argues, however, that "the ginger's stereotypical qualities reflect particular cultural anxieties about whiteness" (9). By this, O'Malley means to reject the idea that the Ginger is somehow an ersatz racial Other whose difference is marked by hair color rather than by skin color. O'Malley points out that the Ginger is not only marked by his/her red hair, but also by their especially pale skin and freckles. Thus, O'Malley views the Ginger as reflecting "cultural anxieties" about normative whiteness—those qualities that dominant whiteness seeks to distance itself from, and can safely do so by creating a form of abnormal (excessive) whiteness. O'Malley's work is informed by online discourse analysis, oral history interviewing, and archival research. She collected over 600 popular internet memes about the Ginger figure, focusing on how these images proliferate in all aspects of popular media online. Her oral histories were collected from redhead festivals, whose value lies in their ability to "shed light on areas of our social world not typically studied, such as everyday, ordinary lived experiences" (15). Commenting on her methodology, O'Malley notes that

nearly every red-haired person I have met in either professional or personal circumstances during the time I have been working on this project has been

familiar with the discourses my narrators describe. Therefore, while these interviews are not generalizable and are focused heavily on people who were already interested in matters of red hair, they do reflect major themes of the ginger phenomenon as it exists in the current moment. (17)

By using these oral histories, O'Malley is able to reveal the way that online discourse has material effects offline.

Before O'Malley's research, the aftermath of *South Park's* "Ginger Kids" episode had not been discussed in scholarly forums. The episode trades on existing stereotypes about redheads in a confused attempt to satirize racial bigotry. Two years after the episode, the "joke holiday" known as "Kick a Ginger Day" led to physical violence against people with red hair—especially children. In the worst attacks, people required hospitalization for the injuries they sustained. What interests O'Malley is the way that these events were taken up in the news, noting that although almost all popular blog reporting condemned the event, people make derogatory comments towards people with red hair in the comments on these blogs.

While redheaded girls and women are certainly affected by Ginger stereotypes, O'Malley pays particular attention to how heteronormative, white masculinity is made "normal" through the creation of the Ginger figure: "in the current cultural moment, red-haired people are no longer scapegoats for anxieties about evilness and a fear of God's wrath"—as they were in the medieval and early modern eras—"but rather, they have become scapegoats for anxieties about whiteness and a loss of social stature" (63). Drawing on Judith Butler's theories of the "performativity" of gender, O'Malley

considers the many ways that masculinity has been defined and understood not as an innate characteristic, but as something enacted and rehearsed in socially-constructed performances and maintained through the marginalization and/or delegitimization of alternatives. This is important to understand because, as has been made clear earlier, the redheaded male that gets labeled as a Ginger tends to be viewed as meek and effeminate.

O'Malley draws attention to the fact that

gingers themselves do not perform or participate in any type of alternative masculinity, but rather, they have been labeled as doing so, based on their physical features, which have symbolic meanings (e.g., weakness) that are incommensurable with the symbolic meanings attached to dominant hegemonic masculinity (e.g., strength) within white Western cultures. (67)

This supposedly “failed” masculinity, O'Malley argues, is part of what makes the image of the Ginger so successful: by creating boundaries for normal, white masculinity, the Ginger works as a scapegoat for those qualities not deemed “masculine,” determined by the sole characteristics of having red hair, pale skin, and freckles.

O'Malley makes an interesting distinction between “white nerd masculinity” and the Ginger’s supposed failed masculinity. Nerdiness, she writes, is defined as a process—a set of *practices* and engagements, rather than an essence. She notes that “though people identified as nerds may face discrimination and bullying, sometimes in severe ways, nerdiness is gendered as masculine, and therefore is not a totally subordinate position” (69). Because of society’s dependence on technology, O'Malley argues, even nerds, whether self-identified or labeled as such by others, hold a higher position than the

Ginger, again making the Ginger the scapegoat for anxieties. In an attempt to further control socially-acceptable masculinity in an ever-changing world, the Ginger is essentialized based on a phenotypic trait, red hair, while the nerd is designated as such for his/her “intellect, lack of attention to their appearances, inept social and relational skills, lack of physical or sport ability,” and so on (O’Malley 69). O’Malley further suggests that “nerd” is not necessarily a negative title: quoting “geek culture” expert J.W. McArthur, O’Malley explains that “what was once geek has now become chic” (69). Yet in order to maintain the power of hegemonic masculinity, boundaries must still be drawn: thus, “the ginger represents the irredeemable qualities of the nerd which remain outside of the boundary” (O’Malley 72). The reason for this is the Ginger’s supposed lack of intelligence and technological skills—skills that allow the nerd to be accepted into masculinity due to the ability to advance economically in the modern capitalist technology-driven world. The Ginger thus represents a scapegoat for anxieties about masculinity, ensuring that the nerd is above the Ginger in that the nerd possesses the ability to make money and advance in a career, making him both attractive and masculine according to white heteronormative capitalist standards, while the Ginger is decidedly incapable of achieving any form of attractiveness or masculinity whatsoever. Using this side-by-side comparison, O’Malley argues that the Ginger figure is thus Othered, safely distanced from white, heteronormative masculinity.

A key aspect of the Ginger phenomenon, O’Malley argues, is the viewer’s reaction of disgust. O’Malley explains that the Ginger’s construction and emasculation comes from being labeled as disgusting and therefore incapable of even registering on the

scale of beauty or sexuality. As a result, he is implicitly regarded as “subhuman” (77), which evokes a response of disgust. However, such reactions of disgust towards a Ginger are typically defended as jokes. Often, these “jokes” are only humorous to the outsider, not the person with red hair, and as O’Malley takes pains to emphasize the “physical and emotional bullying of ginger people has led to teenage suicides. Therefore, even though disgust is often associated with the ginger stereotype in joking discourses with amused tones, it can also have serious consequences” (79).

It is important to consider humor in relation to the representation of the Ginger because, drawing from the work of Christie Davis, O’Malley writes, “when a number of jokes cohere around a single theme, they can be said to form what Emile Durkheim termed a ‘social fact,’ describing some particular aspect of the society from which they derive such as values or norms” (105). One of the key problems with humor on the internet, especially as it pertains to phenotypical stereotyping, is that “in [this] context, sarcasm and satire can be misread easily, or missed entirely, if a person does not have enough background knowledge about a particular subject” (O’Malley 107). This is certainly the cliché defense of the *South Park* episode: the satire was missed, and the “arbitrariness” of redheadedness was taken to be not-so-arbitrary at all. Instead, such humor worked to reinforce essentialist notions about redheads, degrading men and boys to “Gingers” in order to police a specific type of white masculinity.

While online Ginger memes play an inordinately influential role in contemporary public perception of white redheads, so too, argues O’Malley, do popular internet claims about “the science” behind red hair. In practice, she says, using science to “explain”

redheadedness works to further Other redheads to the point of pathologization, such as the common claim that the redhead gene is a “mutation.” O’Malley writes that “the biological explanation for red hair gives weight to redheaded people’s perceived *social* differences, such as weakness (in men) and hypersexuality (in women), and overall strangeness” (123). Such scientific discoveries are disseminated on the internet at the same speed and ease as the Ginger memes, without the need of citations or fact-checking. O’Malley considers the Human Genome Project, which worked to confirm the fact that the genetic makeup of all human beings is, overall, remarkably similar. However, this didn’t stop scientists from seeking the use of population genetics to investigate the small differences that remained. O’Malley reminds us that “though they are often presented as purely technical, systems that classify people, such as genetic maps, are always implicated in social and political struggles” (127). Furthermore, human classification systems, such as categories of race, ethnicity, and ancestry, lead to over-associations of diseases with particular groups of people and, as Dorothy Roberts details, under-association of diseases with other groups, and “a huge racial gap in genetic counseling” (210) for disease risk between white women and African American women. Redheads, O’Malley explains, “have been ‘bioethnically conscripted’ with diseases such as melanoma” (129). O’Malley clarifies that “this is not to say that redheaded people do not have increased risks of some diseases, but that the framing of redheadedness itself as a disease has depended upon ‘socially organized’ work, done by people working in institutions of power like medicine or mass media, as well as in interpersonal interactions, such as in conversation or sharing social media content” (138). Furthermore,

when the Human Genome Project was completed, red hair became increasingly medicalized, making “Kick a Ginger Day” especially concerning. Redheadedness, marked by the “mutated” MC1R gene, became a biological Otherness, referred to in online news reporting as “a genetic disorder,” further feeding into the disgust reaction that the Ginger is meant to evoke. O’Malley goes on to analyze alleged research findings about redheads’ connection to endometriosis, slow aging, and increased sex drive, all of which she found to be either from uncited sources or outright falsely reported. O’Malley concludes her analysis of the science of redheadedness with the qualification that although “the public perception of gingers as Other did not come entirely from genetic science . . . genetic science’s institutional authority did legitimize already circulating discourse about Otherness, especially weakness and hypersexuality” (181).

Outside of the science related to the MC1R gene, O’Malley notes that “often people find [redheads] either too trivial of an issue to be studied, or they understand it as a call for the plight of the ginger (and thus the white person) to be held on par with that of other racial groups. These responses happen particularly within academic settings” (182). By contrast, O’Malley focuses on how Gingers are subjected to certain aspects of racial formation, such as the typification and scientization of their physical appearances. “However,” O’Malley writes, “their whiteness is, in [Richard] Dyer’s terms, socially guaranteed. Their positions of power are not meaningfully threatened by the above processes, and thus they are not fully racialized as Other” (236). Instead, O’Malley argues that the Ginger is interpreted and positioned in one of four ways: as a stand-in for whiteness, as a stand-in for *any* social difference, as an excessive version of whiteness,

and as Other. She gives concrete examples for each of these possible positionings.

O'Malley's latter two interpretations serve as the most useful to my project, as the texts that I analyze clearly take the perspective that the Ginger represents an "excessive," undesirable form of whiteness as well as the idea that "Gingers" are themselves a type of Other.

O'Malley argues that the Ginger can be interpreted as a symbol of excessive whiteness—that is, a *marked* whiteness, which ultimately works to reinforce the existence of a normative and non-normative whiteness. O'Malley explains that "the power of whiteness is in its normalcy and nothing-specialness; therefore, too much whiteness can be perceived as negative" (215). Most people understand, O'Malley argues, that, within white supremacy as a structure, whiteness positions itself against blackness. What is perhaps less obvious is the way that whiteness positions itself against *excessive* whiteness, presented as the Ginger. Drawing again from Richard Dyer, O'Malley takes the idea of "extreme whiteness," which names the type of whiteness that people both fear and aspire to be (the glowing virginal woman and the hyper-muscular action star), and offers the opposite extreme: *excessive* whiteness, portrayed as the Ginger, which people "definitely do not aspire to be" (216). This interpretation of the Ginger further inspires the disgust reaction that is so crucial to the construction of the Ginger as well as the normalization of a specific type of whiteness. Considering several examples that "position gingers as excessively white in comparison to both blackness and normative whiteness" (217), O'Malley argues that such relationships follow the cool/nerdy dichotomy, and are perceived as "either comical or unbelievable, because the

categories of black and white are already diametrically opposed—and gingeriness is at the extreme end of whiteness’ (217). As one of many examples of this, O’Malley offers the characters of Max and Lucas from the Netflix original series, *Stranger Things*, and their romantic relationship. Max is a young redheaded woman who is tomboy-ish, outspoken, and obsessed with her skateboard. Lucas is one of only two black characters on the show. Of the three main characters, Lucas is arguably the “coolest”—he seems to be more mature than his two friends, and yet he is still considered a nerd, making the romantic relationship between the two characters all the more strange. The key point of O’Malley’s argument for this position is that “by contrasting gingeriness with normative whiteness, normative whiteness is distanced from the negative qualities that gingeriness represents” (O’Malley 226).

Finally, O’Malley explains the interpretation of the Ginger as an Other. In post-Civil Rights America, she explains, it became popular for white people to attempt to “rediscover” their non-US “roots,” and therefore claim a new “ethnicity.” This was prompted by the discomfort of visible white skin in a world that was shifting towards multiculturalism. In doing so, O’Malley explains, attempts to typify and even “Other” whiteness were made in order to “make white people feel proud and seem ‘special’” and enable them to “claim a history with a positive valence of struggle and triumph” (227). O’Malley feels that the exact opposite is true for the creation of the Ginger. Rather than creating a “special” type of whiteness, the Ginger is Othered “not to highlight them as extraordinary, but to allow normative whiteness to maintain its position as precisely ordinary, as unmarked, and as such, universally powerful” (227-8). This does not mean

that O'Malley views Gingers as "not white" or excluded from white privilege; rather, her point is that "public interpretation, especially online, at times frames them in this way" (228). She considers, as an extreme example of the attempted Othering of Gingers, the petition to make Gingers a legally protected class. In England in 2013, a teenage girl took her own life after years of being bullied for her red hair, light skin, and freckles, leading her father to call for Ginger bullying to be labeled as a hate crime. O'Malley notes that this suicide was just one of several that occurred during the rise of the Ginger meme. However, the attempt to classify Gingers as a protected category following this specific tragedy brought it the most attention in the news. While hair color is not listed in British anti-discrimination laws as one of the protected categories, local governments in England have the option to add additional categories to the list. Some local governments have chosen to protect "Goths," for example. Ultimately, redheads were never included on such lists because, as O'Malley sees it,

hate crimes are also visible manifestations of the structural and institutional oppression that make them possible. Despite the (at times violent and shocking) examples listed above that have been labeled in popular online media as hate crimes against gingers, there is no evidence for widespread institutional or structural oppression of gingers. Rather, the most serious manifestations of phenomenon tend to reflect interpersonal transgressions. (234-5)

Thus, the Ginger is neither fully racialized nor systemically oppressed, but rather assumes the position of a type of marked whiteness. This "Othering" of the Ginger allows for

dominant white culture to mask the process of normalization of dominant whiteness by using a white redhead to reinstate its dominance.

Of all the existing popular and scholarly examinations of the Ginger/Redhead discourse, O'Malley's takes the most critical look at what the Ginger figure represents today. By contextualizing the contemporary Ginger phenomenon within the ambivalent history of redheaded tropes sketched by other writers, O'Malley makes the argument that the modern understanding of a redhead as a Ginger, as constructed online via social media, reveals many social anxieties about whiteness and excessive whiteness—in particular about weak, “disgusting,” so-called emasculated men and hypersexualized females.

ANALYSIS

To understand how these interpretations of the Ginger and of redheads in general are taken up in discourse about redheads, I use Ratcliffe’s method of rhetorical listening—specifically her conceptions of identification and disidentification³. In this section, I offer an analysis of several contemporary narratives of redheadedness: a documentary film, two book-length histories-cum-personal narratives, and the performance of a song alongside an author interview. My immediate purpose is to understand how the redhead-related stereotypes laid out above are assumed and/or rejected in these disparate narratives in order to reveal the complexity of these tropes as they function to maintain hierarchies of whiteness.

The authors of these texts—filmmaker Scott P. Harris, aforementioned authors Marion Roach and Jacky Colliss Harvey, and comedian/composer Tim Minchin—are themselves redheads who have given a great deal of thought and attention to the meaning of red hair and to questions about the redhead identity. Indeed, this is one of the principal reasons I chose these texts for analysis: the people who have constructed these narratives are keenly aware of the cultural logics about redheads and their associated stereotypes, and therefore they deploy these stereotypes in notably self-reflexive ways. Furthermore, although each of these authors critique redhead-related tropes in one way or another, they also perpetuate various aspects about redhead-related stereotypes in subtle and often

³ Ratcliffe draws from Kenneth Burke and Diana Fuss to inform her definitions of “identification” and “disidentification.” See Frameworks section above.

unintended ways, revealing the complexity of the contradictions and paradoxes about redheadedness.

The Ginger Identity: Scott P. Harris's *Being Ginger*

In 2014, Scott P. Harris released the final version of his film *Being Ginger*, which grew out of his MA work at the University of Edinburgh several years earlier. Although at first glance this documentary appears to be a comedy (he jocularly describes it as a film about a redheaded man trying to find love), it ultimately sheds light on the way that many white redheaded men are judged and mistreated for their physical appearance, which, in turn, has lasting effects on their self-confidence. In other words, this documentary works as an example of how the Ginger figure is used to police boundaries of a specific type of white masculinity from which the Ginger is excluded. The documentary uses clips of Harris speaking directly to the camera, interviews with strangers about Gingers, and animated sequences to recreate some of Harris's experiences with redhead-specific bullying and microaggression. It is important to remember that the documentary footage, along with all of the editing to create the final cut, are themselves performances and representations. As decades of scholarship have emphasized, documentaries, despite their name, are constructions rather than transparent representations of reality, and Harris is part of a generation of filmmakers who self-consciously foreground the "performative" aspects of the genre. Thus, I am offering a textual analysis of this film rather than a psychological analysis of Harris as an

individual. In what follows, I unpack how the film “internalizes” certain Ginger stereotypes in its detailed description of Harris’s journey.

The film opens with Harris explaining that he is constantly being told that someone knows a friend of a friend who loves Gingers, and therefore he sets out to find one of these “mystical creatures”—ideally one who wants to date him. Perhaps he has watched too many Romcoms, he admits, but he’s sure that there are crazier ways to get a date in the 21st century. Thus, he decides to conduct interviews with passersby in a public park over the course of several months. When the first woman that Harris interviews says that she does, in fact, like Gingers, Harris’s quest for love looks promising—until the woman, Emily, explains that her attraction to Ginger men is rooted in an adolescent literary crush on *Harry Potter*’s Ron Weasley (the awkward, redheaded sidekick), and that she realizes she is the exception to the rule: “red hair is not the most loved hair color on men,” she explains.

Harris continues to interview strangers about Ginger men, and the interviewees’ opinions are portrayed in a dispiriting montage: “fat,” “uglier than women with red hair,” and “bad with women,” are some of the top responses, with exceptions being made for (of course) Ron Weasley and the English monarchy’s Prince Harry. Harris objects that Ron Weasley is the quintessential Ginger stereotype: he’s not good at magic, and he’s not good with girls—but the interviewees just laugh and explain that this *sometimes* works. Harris is left confused. Amid these interviews, Harris’s friend and impromptu camera operator Lou asks Harris several questions of her own, including the recurring question that seems to haunt Harris throughout the film: why don’t you just try dating a redheaded

woman? Harris simply retorts that redheads don't date other redheads, a claim that is popular on many online listicles. However, Lou's question prompts Harris to ask subsequent interviewees how they feel about Ginger women, not just Ginger men. The general consensus is that "guys like them" and they're "less goofy" and "kinda sexy," while Ginger men are "quite the opposite."

While waiting for more interviewees, Lou asks Harris about childhood bullying. The scene cuts to the first of several animations that recreates one of Harris's elementary school experiences⁴, where he was told by his peers that he wasn't allowed to sit at any of the tables in the cafeteria because "we hate you," prompting Harris to eat alone on the floor in the hallway. In voiceover, Harris explains: "Everyone knew it was happening—my friends knew, the school knew, and no one ever did anything about it. The principal finally gave me a laminated hall pass that said 'Scott Harris is allowed to eat his lunch alone on the floor next to the gym,' so that teachers would leave me alone." The story ends with the young cartoon Harris sitting alone, surrounded by darkness, before returning to real-life Harris and his friends editing clips for the film.

Harris explains that although he did have a successful first date with Emily, the first woman he interviewed, his texts to her afterwards were ignored. He shares that he reached out to her before the initial screening of the film so that she could see it before it went out into the public. She responded enthusiastically and requested a second date, but the date never happened. Harris explains that he was planning on ending his film here,

⁴ Though Harris is creating his film in Scotland, he is an American citizen and the elementary school experiences that he describes took place in the States.

but from the test screening, he found that audience members were particularly interested in the parts of the film about bullying—and therefore he continued, despite his own hesitation about digging into such a personally painful topic. To illustrate, he uses another animated segment to share an encounter he had a few weeks earlier. Harris explains that he was walking down the street when “a man who had all the signs of going through chemotherapy” (portrayed as white in the animation) stopped, pointed at Harris, and said to his friends, “at least I’m not Ginger.” Through this “joke,” a point about social hierarchies is being made: the man is indirectly acknowledging the social stigma of being ill and/or differently abled, even as he assures himself that “at least” there are even lower perceived positions in the social hierarchy. Thus, in order to negotiate this social designation, the joke is used to create distinctions between two social positions that have been labeled as undesirable. Masked by humor, the assertion that it would be *worse* to be Ginger than to be ill reinforces the idea that the Ginger is at the very bottom of the hierarchy—not simply below the “nerd,” as O’Malley argued, but below *all* other social categories. This joke, rather than rejecting the stigmatization of illness, perpetuates the idea that the Ginger is undesirable—so undesirable, in fact, that it would be worse to be Ginger than to be going through chemotherapy.

Lou and Harris return to the park to find more interviewees, and it is at this point that Harris’s film turns more deeply—and more troublingly—introspective. Again, Lou asks Harris why he doesn’t date redheaded women, and Harris explains that “Gingers are ugly. I don’t like them. Every time I see a Ginger walking past, male or female, I don’t like them. But I think it’s just I don’t like myself, so I’m projecting myself on them

because it's the character trait that I most readily identify with when I see other people." Whether or not Harris meant to say *character* trait rather than *physical* trait is unknown. It is, however, revealing of how intertwined red hair is with Harris's sense of identity as portrayed in this film. By explaining that red hair is a "character trait" with which he identifies, Harris avows his own deeply-rooted prejudice against redheads, and therefore against himself *and* others. Though Harris professes repeatedly throughout the film that his red hair does not define who he is as a person, the claim that his red hair represents a "character trait" suggests that even Harris is not immune to the discourse of redheadedness that his documentary examines. Because the discourse of redheadedness identifies Harris as a Ginger who possesses certain unappealing character traits, Harris, despite his attempt to disidentify with this socially-created identification, projects this same disgust reaction towards redheads onto other redheads that he sees, deeming them "ugly" and "undateable." This projection only further perpetuates the discourse that redheads are disgusting—a judgment implicit in the axiom that "redheads don't date other redheads." Using rhetorical listening to analyze this claim suggests that even people with red hair are socially conditioned to react to other redheads with disgust, underscoring how powerful the Ginger/Redhead discourse is.

In a final, almost farcical, attempt to find women who like Ginger men, Harris wanders another public park while wearing a sign that reads, "looking 4 women who like gingers. Seriously." In voiceover, he explains that this somewhat ridiculous stunt was meant to "provoke a reaction." Some passersby yelled "good luck" while others asked to take a photo with Harris. Again, Harris makes a montage of the responses, devoting a

generous amount of time to the advice that one man gave him to just dye his hair another color. When Harris explains that he doesn't want to dye his hair because he wants to just "be himself," the man explains, "I understand that, but it's just not working for you." Here, again, is an example of boundaries being drawn around white masculinity. The advice to simply change his hair color, according to this interviewee, would fix Harris's problem because he would no longer be immediately identified as a Ginger. Instead, with any other hair color, his whiteness would be "unmarked." However, he would still have the freckles, the pale skin, and the red eyebrows and eyelashes, as is made clear by another interviewee, a nameless blonde woman, who goes into great depth about the disgustingness of Ginger men in what is arguably the most cruel interaction shown on the documentary. She explains that "Gingers have a place in society—not one that I would date"—her shorthand for the ranks of sexual attractiveness, perhaps—then goes on a rant about how much she hates freckles because they are "associated with being unattractive, like the little freckly kid in school. Like, there's no hot people with freckles—it's like the Gingeriness is all speckled across your face." Furthermore, she insists, "no Ginger body hair!" When Harris asks why, she makes a face of disgust and finds herself at a loss for words. Harris asks if he should just shave his entire body instead. After a pause, the woman decides that he should do so if he is going to be topless in public, such as when he goes on holiday. But, she continues, "don't wax it—Ginger hair is very resilient, so it's really hard to take off." Obviously, the blond woman is drawing boundaries around which kinds of white masculinity are acceptable and desirable, and by declaring that Ginger hair is more "resilient" than other hair, and therefore harder to get rid of, she also

reinforces the Otherness of the Ginger (never mind the assumption that such Otherness is unsightly). She is also distancing herself from this lowly “place in society” where she feels that Harris, as a Ginger, belongs.

Spontaneously, the woman shares her first experience engaging in Ginger bullying, which took place in kindergarten, when she and her non-redheaded peers all threw their milk-soaked cheddar biscuits at “the Ginger kid” in the class and yelled “Ginger nut” until he began to cry. She claims that even the teachers laughed before they helped clean him up. When Harris asks her how she thinks this might have affected the child, she supposes that it was probably not nearly as bad as what this same kid eventually went through in high school. However, she contends, “Gingers just get used to it. Like, they just accept ‘yeah, I’m Ginger.’” She argues that it must be this very “acceptance” that led Harris to make the film in the first place. He knows, she claims, that he is “the ‘joke’ Ginger—like, you’re *so* Ginger!” and therefore he’s making the film so that other people can laugh at him. Harris counters with the possibility that he’s making the film to spark change and, in a way, to “fix himself,” but the woman only laughs at this response and says “no.” Harris stares at the camera in apparent disbelief, then thanks her for her “illuminating” responses.

This interview is a clear example of how the Ginger represents excessive whiteness, which is used to mark the boundaries around a seemingly “normal” whiteness. Simply dying Harris’s hair another color would not change his other tell-tale “Ginger” traits—i.e., his freckles, pale skin, and red bodily hair. That there is a whole array of “disgusting” phenotypical characteristics associated with redheads in Ginger discourse

would tend to support O'Malley's argument that the Ginger is pseudoracialized: to be "Ginger" is not quite as simple as being marked by red hair, but by the combination of red hair, pale skin, freckles, etc.

Following this final attempt to gather interviews from people on the street, Harris again retreats to his kitchen for another conversation with Lou, reflecting on what the film is meant to be about. In a way, he muses, the blond woman was right. He explains "this was never supposed to be a film about bullying, this was a film about having red hair, and it was funny and it was light." What Harris has found, however, is that there is a lot more going on with Ginger stereotyping and how his red hair affects his sense of self. Harris describes yet another experience with bullying that he had in school: when Harris was seven, there was a bully who would take breaks for recess as opportunities to ask everyone to stand up if they hated Harris. This happened every day, and of course every student in the class stood up, which often led to Harris crying. When the teacher returned after the class break, he would notice Harris crying, and say "if you don't stop blubbing, I'm going to string you up like a human pinata and let everyone beat you." While Harris acknowledges that this particularly harrowing treatment was not explicitly tied to his red hair, he feels that it is safe to assume that the unstated excuse was his red hair, which made him stand out and therefore left him subject to such intense bullying. Harris recognizes that, to this day, he automatically assumes that everyone around him hates him because he was constantly being told this in his adolescent years.

As Harris begins to wrap up his film, he starts looking for screening venues, which is how he discovers "The Redhead Days" in the Netherlands, famous for being the

original and largest “redhead festival” that happens annually. Harris reaches out to the event coordinators, who agree to let Harris screen the latest working cut of his film during the event for a theatre full of strangers—the biggest platform his documentary had seen up to this point.

“The Redhead Days” began by accident in 2005, when Dutch artist Bart Rouwenhorst, inspired by the artwork of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, put out an advertisement for female, redheaded models in the local newspaper in his town of Breda. He expected around 10-15 models to respond, but over 150 volunteered. Rouwenhorst hosted a gathering where the women would meet for a group photo and take part in a lottery to cull the pool to fourteen. This started what is now known as The Redhead Days. Over the next decade and a half, similar redhead festivals became popular in eighty countries across the globe, although the most popular ones take place in Ireland, England, and the United States.

Redhead festival tickets vary in price, and they usually take place over several days. The gatherings are not restricted to redheads only, but it is the redheads who are counted and photographed. In 2015, The Redhead Days festival in the town of Breda, Netherlands, where Rouwenhorst put out his initial call for redheaded models, set the Guinness World Record for “most redheads in one place”: 1,672. Donica O'Malley, who visited several redhead festivals as part of her research, is concerned with some of their more problematic aspects (slogans such as “Ginger Lives Matter,” poached from social justice movements, for example), but Harris focuses on these events as spaces where redheads can celebrate their oft-maligned phenotypic trait(s).

When Harris, with Lou behind the camera, shows up for the multi-day event, he continues with his interviews. This time, however, everyone that Harris speaks with is either a redhead or a redhead's friend or family member. The camera follows Harris around as he poses with hundreds of other redheads to take group photos and celebrate red hair. Vendors hand out free sunscreen and redhead-related swag while bars offer a variety of Ginger-themed cocktails and drinks. Harris finds himself overwhelmed by the sheer volume of redheads, a sharp contrast to the earlier footage Harris collected in Edinburgh, where redheads in the street were scarce, standing out easily amid a crowd. What shocks Harris, however, is how beautiful he finds these Gingers, regardless of age or gender.

Clips from the festival are interspersed with Harris reflecting on the event in a cafe away from the festival grounds. Towards the end of the festival, he notes that "it's a very strange experience talking to so many redheads. It's hard to explain, because it seems like such a small thing, but it's not for me." What Harris means by "but it's not for me" is that because red hair is such a rare coloring, redheads often find that they are the *only* person with this stand-out color in any given room. Beginning in very early childhood, red hair, at the very least, makes redheads stand out while, in more extreme cases, it leads to intense bullying and ostracization. Red hair is an inescapable identifier. However, when Harris finds himself surrounded by so many people who share this unique marker, he considers the power of solidarity: "when you feel alone, you feel hopeless and lost, and just having a conversation with someone and knowing that they know what you're talking about, there's a connection there . . ." Harris gets choked up,

and doesn't finish his sentence. For Harris, being redheaded has always meant being excluded from social groups or singled out for bullying. Because his hair color leads others to identify him as a Ginger, with all the dehumanizing meanings associated with this identity construction, Harris admits that he has been attempting to reject this identification by rejecting other redheads. In an attempt to distance himself from the "disgusting" features that have been cast onto the Ginger figure, he has perpetuated Ginger discourse by immediately "hating" every redhead that he sees. The redhead festival, however, has allowed Harris to identify with his red hair and reclaim the Ginger identity in a more positive light.

At the end of the film, Harris acknowledges that although he didn't find the love story he was hoping for when he first embarked on making the film, he got something better: he got to put red hair in the spotlight in a positive way. In Harris's final reflections from the redhead festival, he acknowledges that "the only time I got attention was when I was getting bullied and the only time I was in the spotlight was when I was getting hurt, so I've never felt comfortable being in the spotlight." In making this film, however, Harris was able to grapple with how the discourse of redheadedness has shaped not only how he sees himself, but how he sees other redheads as well. Analyzing this documentary using rhetorical listening in instances of identification and disidentification sheds light on the way that even Harris has internalized negative stereotypes about redheads, despite being one himself.

The Redhead Identity: Marion Roach and Jacky Colliss Harvey

While Harris's documentary closely examines the way that the Ginger stereotype has affected perceptions about redheaded men (and the self-perceptions *of* redheaded men), Roach's and Harvey's works are primarily concerned with female redheads. While these works seek to reveal the myth, meaning, and history of redheadedness, they inadvertently perpetuate various stereotypes about the female Redhead. Roach, for example, devotes entire chapters to historicizing and demystifying tropes about the hypersexualized Redhead. And yet Roach herself embraces many of those same tropes. Roach's own embodiment of the trope is made most clear in the final chapter of her book, titled, "You May Be Many Things, Young Lady, but You Are No Redhead." Here, Roach draws heavily from her personal experiences and observations of redheads to try to understand what the redheaded identity means for her: "Having traveled extensively, given blood, looked at cages of mice, sifted through ancient texts, viewed paintings and mosaics, and interviewed scientists, all in an effort to identify red hair, I have tried to remain neutral in my conclusions," she says, "but it has proved impossible" (184). Turning her analytical lens inward, Roach explains how in her own life, she has *intentionally* curated elements of cliché redheadedness and incorporated them into her own identity or, at the very least, as *inspiration* for the kind of woman—the kind of *redhead*—that she wants to be. Roach explains, "some of what I've observed is almost magnetic in its draw; certain identifiers have real appeal. Not all. A little of this, a little of that—I have consciously added ingredients of both science and sex to the recipe of my own identity" (184). While this self-conscious irony seems to be meant in part as a

“gimmick,” a device for bringing the research full circle for her reader, it also works to further perpetuate the stereotypes about redheaded women. Roach goes so far as to note that, “even among the images of evil that I’ve perused . . . I find the idea of being a little bit bad—as well as enticing someone else to be so—undeniably alluring, perhaps even promising” (185). Despite her in-depth study to dismantle the myths that are associated with redheadedness, Roach admits that she has intentionally adopted parts of the Redhead persona which, in turn, validates these tropes about redheaded women.

Roach offers an interesting personal anecdote which, she implies, led her to embrace the identity of the Redhead: she was dating a man shortly after college, she says, and when he finally introduced her to his parents, he made a passing comment about Roach being a “redhead.” The man’s father quickly cut him off and, addressing her directly, said that “[y]ou may be many things, young lady, but you are no redhead” (193). On its face, the meaning of this exchange is opaque. But I would argue that it serves as yet another example of how redheads are used to create boundaries between different levels of whiteness. Roach’s boyfriend’s father, perhaps aware of the Redhead trope, refused to let Roach or her partner identify her as being redheaded, despite the bright red color of her hair. Roach explains, “his response felt like a punch in the jaw. That he didn’t like me was okay, but his denying who I am was not” (193). While Roach attempted to identify with her red hair color, stereotypes attached or not, this man she had never met was taking it upon himself to disidentify her from the Redhead trope. Thus, in consciously choosing to identify herself as a redhead, and, later, selectively adopting

aspects of the Redhead trope, Roach is able to reclaim her identity and signify it through her writing as something desirable.

Harvey does something similar. To start, the biographical blurb on her book jacket and on her website notes that “her red hair has also found her an alternative career as a life model and a film extra, playing everything from a society lady in *Atonement* to a Parisian whore in *Bel Ami*.” I find this note interesting for many reasons: first, because red hair is easily obtained with hair dye, and therefore this “side career” isn’t limited to “natural” redheads. More important, these roles—“high society” lady and Parisian sex worker—are ostentatious Redhead clichés. Such a biographical note seems out of place when Harvey’s entire book works to trace the history of red hair and counter many of the myths associated with it. Perhaps this note was meant to be ironic, or perhaps Harvey feels that, having exposed some of the mechanisms of objectification that redheaded women are subjected to, she can now confidently subject *herself* to such clichés as a form of empowerment. However, this technique would only work for those who have already read her book, or are otherwise aware of the constructed nature of the Redhead trope. Thus, using rhetorical listening, I argue that Harvey’s nod to her “side career” suggests that she herself has adopted the Redhead persona and is perpetuating the tropes about the kind of women that redheads tend to be.

Equally paradoxical is one of the final chapters of her book, where Harvey considers redheads’ performances in the bedroom. She buys into the idea that the “redhead mutation” means that redheads are biologically different, writing that “redheads *do* smell different. Or rather, if you have red in your hair, anything applied to your skin is

going to smell different from the way it will smell on anyone else” (147). As O’Malley points out, although the bulk of Harvey’s text is well sourced and researched (in a quasi-scholarly way), this section on the sexual performance and biology of redheads lacks scientific grounding and contributes to the pathologization of redheads. Granted: Harvey doesn’t *consistently* biologize or essentialize “redhead difference”; she notes, for example, that the socio-cultural expectations about the Redhead can lead to redheads being “better” in the bedroom where, aware of their *expected* talents, they may have a higher sense of self-efficacy and therefore feel freer to perform. And yet that argument, too, only works to further perpetuate the very myths that drive it. (The sexual performance of redheaded *men*, meanwhile, is beyond the scope of Harvey’s consideration.)

Simultaneous Identification and Disidentification: Tim Minchin’s “Prejudice”

The last text I wish to take up is perhaps the most interesting, for it reveals an instance where the Ginger trope is intentionally identified with and disidentified in specific ways in two very different public contexts. As I mentioned earlier, Ratcliffe (drawing from Fuss and Burke) defines *disidentification* as an identification that has been acknowledged and then consciously rejected. Many redheads seek ways to disidentify with the Ginger stereotype as a means of distancing themselves from its negative connotations. In the following example, the act of disidentification can be elucidated by using rhetorical listening to analyze the on-stage performance of Tim Minchin, the Australian comedian, composer, and actor most famous for *Matilda the Musical*, an

award-winning Broadway production. Minchin has done several stand-up specials where he mixes his talent for comedy, lyric writing, and piano playing on a variety of stages, including a sold-out filmed performance at the Royal Albert Hall in London. I am particularly intrigued by Minchin's stage performance of his song "Prejudice," whose lyrics reveal several cultural logics around language, naming, and stereotype through the lens of Gingerism. Using several of Ratcliffe's tools for rhetorical listening, I will consider contradictions in the personas that Tim Minchin constructs in his performance of "Prejudice" and in his personal interview with *The Guardian*.

In "Prejudice," Minchin uses satirical lyrics to parallel the burdens faced by redheads with the burdens faced by Black people—a comparison that is not revealed in advance. He introduces "Prejudice" as "a song about prejudice, / and the language of prejudice, / and the power of the language of prejudice." He begins by playing slow and eerie music on the piano. The stage lights are low and Minchin's red hair is glowing in the spotlight. In an introductory verse, Minchin explains in a solemn, recitative style that "in our modern, free-spoken society, / there is a word that we still hold taboo: / a word with a terrible history / of being used to abuse, oppress and subdue." The audience is quiet. He explains that this word has "six seemingly harmless letters, / arranged in a way that will form a word / with more power than the pieces of metal / that are forged to make swords." Then the tempo picks up. Minchin lists these letters: "a couple of Gs, an R and an E, an I and an N." Minchin pauses, and the audience is left to guess about the particular six-letter word he's referring to. He continues by noting that these "six little letters, / all jumbled together, / have caused damage that we may never mend," then

claims, “it’s important that we all respect / that if these people should happen to choose / to reclaim the word as their own / it doesn’t mean the rest of you have a right to its use.”

What word comes to mind? The unspeakable N-word, of course: a six-letter word, comprised of those specific letters, used to abuse, oppress, and subdue. Underneath his lyrics, Minchin plays dramatically on the piano, and reminds the audience, “sticks and stones / can break your bones / but words can break hearts.” Then the music shifts to a lighter, jazzier mood and Minchin breaks into the main chorus: “only a Ginger / can call another Ginger ‘Ginger.’” The audience, relieved, roars with laughter.

Minchin’s humor relies on the dichotomy he creates between anti-Black racism and anti-Ginger stereotyping. The song’s success depends on his audience’s awareness of not only the anti-Black racist epithet containing all of the same letters as “Ginger,” but also the understanding that white people, such as Minchin, are not supposed to use this racist epithet. He creates this dichotomy in the slow-build up to the main content of the song: first, Minchin acknowledges that language is powerful with the cliché about sticks and stones. Minchin also reminds his audience that although this is a “modern, free-spoken society,” there are certain words that “the rest of you” don’t have the right to use. By using the term “free-spoken,” Minchin nods to the discredited “free-speech” defense that allows everyone to use the same words—even words that have been traditionally used to “abuse, oppress and subdue.” By mocking the outdated defense of “free speech,” Minchin is nodding to the fact that many white people refuse to “hear” or “respect” the power of language, or the fact that there are certain words that they do not have the right to continue to use. By using defensiveness and denial to claim that there is nothing wrong

with using racialized language, including racist epithets, as a form of exercising one's "freedom of speech," white people are able to continue to oppress and maintain a rhetoric of dysfunctional silence, where the dominant culture "refuses to hear" (Ratcliffe 85). Minchin rolls his eyes, rejecting such a defense. He states explicitly that if an oppressed group chooses to reclaim a "taboo" word, its usage is reserved for that group alone. In other words, when rhetorically listening to these lyrics—by taking a "stance of openness . . . in relation to any person, text, or culture" (Ratcliffe 17)—it is clear that Minchin recognizes the differences between consciously *identifying* with a certain group or word (trope) and *being identified by others* with a certain group or word (trope). According to Ratcliffe, rhetorical listening requires focusing on conscious identifications, which is ultimately what this song is about: in the lyrics of "Prejudice," Minchin successfully captures the distinction between identity and identification that Ratcliffe defines in her work by focusing on the stereotypes that have been cast on redheads via the label "Ginger," which he both reclaims and rejects in the lyrics of this song.

Once Minchin reveals that the taboo word he is referring to is "Ginger," the song not only switches to a more openly comic mode, but also picks up in speed. In addition to a myriad of Ginger and redhead-related puns, Minchin lists some of the experiences related to being a redhead: "years of ritual bullying in the schoolyard / kids calling you 'rang' and 'fanta pants' / no invitation to the high school dance." Applying Ratcliffe's method of ethical rhetorical eavesdropping as a means of "investigating" a "historical moment" (103-4), I interpret the audience's laughter here as a kind of validation, a commonsense acknowledgment that such schoolyard bullying is accepted and acceptable

cultural practice. Everyone knows that these experiences are the norm, that redheaded kids get bullied and left out of social events—if it wasn't common cultural knowledge, the song would be a flop and the audience would not be laughing. Minchin goes on to explain that “you try to keep your cool and not get het up / but until the feeling of ill is truly let up / then the word is ours and ours alone.” This lyric alludes to another stereotype about redheads having fiery tempers: they know they must struggle to keep “cool” in the midst of such targeted bullying, because if they stand up for themselves, their behavior will be written off as an outburst of a classic redheaded temper, never mind what caused it. Minchin uses these specific experiences to make the audience laugh at his own expense, and they laugh because they understand the stereotypes that underlie each “joke.” And yet he is having a laugh at their expense, too. Their laughter contains a hint of nervousness—there is a recognition that Minchin both is and isn't making a point about Ginger discourse being comparable to anti-Black racism. So while the audience is relieved, on the one hand, when they realize that Minchin is “only” talking about Gingers, they also can't help being struck by how much of what they *thought* he was going to talk about actually applies to what he *is* talking about. Thus, the laughter is somewhat discomfiting.

In the latter part of his song, Minchin shifts gears to address the gendered aspects of Ginger discourse: Gingers, he says, “do alright with the females / yeah, I like to ask the ladies ‘round for a ginger beer, / and soon they're runnin' their fingers through my ginger beard.” This shift from being excluded from the high school dance to doing “alright with the females” seems unexpected, but only at first. After closer examination, this claim

works to *reject* many of the socially-accepted beliefs about Gingers: by asserting that “once you go ginge, you never go back”—here appropriating a colloquial phrase from Black culture to refer to the beauty and desirability of Black people while evoking white men’s fears and envy around fantasized Black male sexual prowess, fears of white male sexual inadequacy, and imagined dangers of miscegenation—Minchin seeks to claim a positive image as someone who is desirable, rather than the stereotype that redheaded men are meek and undesirable. Furthermore, by reclaiming this identity and flipping the normalized stereotypes about Gingers, Minchin’s lyrics work to reveal the anxieties around white masculinity that are cast onto the figure of the Ginger—i.e., being unattractive, weak, and excluded from social groups.

To help support the assertion that redheaded men are desirable (and, in a sense, to prove it), Minchin looks to English singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran—deemed by the Internet as one of today’s most adored red-haired men⁵. Though Sheeran was not present at the Royal Albert Hall performance, there are several recordings online of Sheeran performing “Prejudice” with Minchin. Unsurprisingly, the audience goes wild when Sheeran joins Minchin on stage in these recordings. By rejecting the socially-accepted notion that redheaded men are undesirable and bringing in one of the most famous (and thus desirable) redheaded celebrities, Minchin works to reclaim the Ginger identity by actively identifying with the term in a positive and comedic way.

⁵ Sheeran won four Grammy awards following his 2011 debut album, +. Claims have been made that due to “The Ed Sheeran Effect,” red hair on men has become desirable (see, e.g., Andrew Trendell).

Or so I thought. In an interview with *The Guardian* that touches on the song “Prejudice,” Minchin has insisted—whether earnestly or perversely, it is hard to discern—that he does not consider himself a redhead. Kate Kellaway, the interviewer, explained that she has two red-haired sons and that one of them requested that Kellaway pass along a message for him: “you’re a ginger . . . only a ginger can call another ginger ‘ginger,’” the main chorus of Minchin’s song. However, Kellaway explains, “what I am not expecting—a startling start—is Minchin’s out-and-out denial.” Despite Minchin’s claim that “only a Ginger can call another Ginger ‘Ginger,’” Minchin declared: “I am not a redhead. I have never been and am still not. Well, just a little . . . but I was blond as a kid and then mousy brown. . . . I’ve got a lot of red in my hair but I’m not a ginge.” This response shocked me, as well as the interviewer. Both of us would call Minchin’s hair red, as would the creators of all of the fan art I found online. The interviewer offers “strawberry blond,” so as not to offend Minchin, but clearly feels that Minchin’s hair is distinctly red. Minchin’s “Prejudice” emphasizes that “only a Ginger can call another Ginger ‘Ginger,’” and yet he himself rejects the label—in other words, he doesn’t “choose to reclaim the word as [his] own.” In fact, he doesn’t accept the redhead identity at all outside of his on-stage performance of the song in what would seem to be a textbook example of disidentification: “people look at me and say, ‘Yeah, you’re a redhead.’ But they only say that because they are expecting it. I am a very ginger-coloured person but I don’t have orange hair.” A “Ginger-colored” person? Again, we see boundaries being drawn around different types of whiteness as Minchin’s prevaricating

recalls O'Malley's argument that the Ginger figure is marked not only by red hair, but also by extremely pale skin and an abundance of freckles.

What makes Minchin's claim that he is not a Ginger most paradoxical is the fact that Minchin is aware that he is "Ginger-colored." Due to his self-proclaimed lack of red hair, he feels that he is not *fully* Ginger and therefore rejects this identity, revealing just how powerful the lure of normative white masculinity is. As mentioned earlier, a disidentification is an identification that has already been made and denied in the unconscious. In "Prejudice," Minchin reveals his awareness of many of the clichés about redheaded bullying and stereotyping—he's aware of the power of the Ginger figure and the connotations associated with red hair, implying that he himself has been subjected to such labeling. However, by rejecting the Ginger identity in the interview—a platform that is meant to be more personal—Minchin is disidentifying with the Ginger, whose identifications he has clearly acknowledged through "Prejudice." This, to me, works to further perpetuate the negative connotations attached to the Ginger label. Despite his claim that "once you go Ginge / you never go back," identifying with the Ginger, for Minchin, seems to be more closely tied to negative stereotypes, and therefore he chooses to disidentify with the trope when he is not performing the song and exploiting the Ginger stereotype.

Through Minchin's "Prejudice" and the interview with *The Guardian*, we see him negotiating the discourse of redheadedness with two contrasting personas, both in his song (with the juxtaposition of "no invitation to the high school dance" and "we do

alright with the females”) as well as in his choice *not* to reclaim the Ginger identity as his own in the Kellaway interview—two very different platforms for identity performance.

Summary

These examples demonstrate a range of ways that redheaded white people may embody and/or exploit the Ginger/Redhead figure. In spite of their limitations, these same examples begin to reveal the way that redhead-related tropes become internalized. It is important to remember that, as O’Malley argues, although humor has the potential to be subversive, it can also reinforce dominant ideologies. Thus, the use of rhetorical listening allows for the revelation of redheadedness as a trope, illuminating the ways that a socially constructed label can “become embodied in people via socialization and also how many people may (to some degree) resist this socialization” (Ratcliffe 156). The Ginger/Redhead is an example of an embodied trope that intersects with the identities and identifications of redheads, who are very often the butt of the joke, both on the playground and in the policing of the boundaries of whiteness.

Room for Research

When examining stereotypes, it is important to consider not only how and why certain groups of people are typified and then reduced and essentialized, but also how this affects the identities of those who are being stereotyped. My contribution to the study of redheadedness is an analysis of how the Ginger/Redhead trope becomes internalized in narratives of identity crafted for public audiences. This work opens the door to more questions. Each of the texts that I have analyzed was intentionally created and

constructed for a specific audience, thus making it unfair to draw general conclusions about redhead identities from these examples. What is still unknown is how redhead-related tropes become internalized in the identities of redheaded individuals on a daily basis, rather than by those who are seeking out an audience. To answer such questions, contemporary psychology and/or social science methods may be of use. Research about whether or not red hair is considered attractive, like the outdated studies discussed in my literature review, are not useful. Instead, further research on how tropes and stereotypes associated with redheads become internalized and affect *actual* redheaded individuals is needed.

One question that I am especially interested in is whether or not “stereotype threat” exists for redheads who have been consistently labeled as Gingers. The idea of “stereotype threat” has been studied since its development by Claude Steele in the 1990s. Steele defined the phenomenon of stereotype threat as

a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists . . . Where bad stereotypes about these groups apply, members of these groups can fear being reduced to that stereotype. And for those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be self-threatening. (614)

Steele’s work was concerned with African-American students and women in math, science, and engineering. In “Embodied Harm: A Phenomenological Engagement with Stereotype Threat,” Lauren Freeman expands stereotype threat into something that not only harms one’s performance in specific contexts, but also becomes embodied as “a part

of one's identity, and thus a background lens through which one experiences the world" (637). Each of the texts that I analyze suggest that having red hair and being associated with its various connotations provides a type of "background lens" through which to see the world. It would be interesting to further investigate the ways that these labels and connotations become embodied and how they affect a wide sample of ordinary people with red hair.

Freeman argues that stereotype threat "occurs when either consciously or unconsciously, individuals believe that their behavior in a given context confirms a stereotype about a social group of which they are a member" (642). The "social group," in this case, is people with red hair who are identified as fitting either the Ginger or Redhead stereotypes. Freeman has found that stereotype threat does *not* disappear when the individual is no longer in the stereotype-relevant environment (for example, a redheaded male trying *not* to be awkward around women). While Steele et al. found that this type of threat existed in specific situations, Freeman has argued that such deeply-ingrained stereotypic beliefs "extend well beyond the immediate stereotype-relevant context into one's everyday experiences . . . [they] become embodied, a point that is not discussed within the social psychology literature" (645). Stereotype threat works regardless of whether or not the person being stereotyped personally believes that the stereotypes about the group are true, leading to "decreased confidence more generally, increased self-doubt, feelings of dejection, decreased interest and aspirations to pursue careers in stereotyped domains, increased general anxiety, and physiological effects such as increased blood pressure and chronic stress" (Freeman 646). Thus, I am curious about

whether or not Freeman's expansion of stereotype threat applies to redheaded individuals who fit the Ginger/Redhead stereotype.

This also prompts questions about how "self-fulfilling prophecy" might work for female redheads who are associated with the Redhead trope—for example, Harvey's theory about a redheaded woman's performance in the bedroom. Robert Merton coined the term in 1948, explaining that "the self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true" (195). Self-fulfilling prophecy is directly linked to one's self-efficacy. If stereotypes and stereotype threat lead to low self-efficacy, then it's likely that the embodied harm that Freeman describes will occur. It's also possible, however, for self-fulfilling prophecy to be beneficial when one's self-efficacy is high—for example, positive assumptions about the female redhead in the bedroom (however problematic) can lead to a positive self-fulfilling prophecy, while the reverse is true for Ginger men. Thus, I feel it is important to consider both the possibility for stereotype threat and for self-fulfilling prophecy when considering the effects that stereotypes have on people with red hair.

CONCLUSION

When I started this project, I was motivated by my personal frustration about the tropes associated with redheadedness. I didn't understand how they were doing more than causing emotional harm to individual redheads, like myself—how they were being used, both consciously and subconsciously, to create boundaries within the hierarchy of whiteness. But while the research I've undertaken does not allow me to disassociate myself from the stereotypes attached to my hair color, the frameworks that I've used enable me to see the way that such stereotypes function beyond the individual harm they cause me.

Towards the very end of my work on this project, I overheard a conversation between two white women in a restaurant restroom. While waiting for one of the two stalls to be free, I couldn't help but prick up my ears when I heard something about a "redheaded slut phase." As it turned out, the two women were talking about how much they despised red hair. They claimed that redheads were "gross;" that no "natural redhead" is ever "actually pretty," because "natural red hair doesn't look good on anyone." They claimed that dyed shades of red *could* work, however, and one of the women admitted that, when she was much younger, she had dyed her hair red for a brief time, which is what she'd referred to (and I had overheard) as her "slut phase." I remembered the meme I mentioned in my introduction, with the warning about how "you should never date a girl in her redhead phase." The negative labels seemed endless. I stood in shock as I listened to this conversation, half-expecting someone to jump out with a video camera saying, "gotcha!" Instead, I just waited for my turn.

After the first woman finally emerged from her stall, she saw me and froze. A moment later, her friend came out, saw me, and laughed hysterically: “what are the odds we run into one right now!?” I tried to laugh. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the restaurant’s outdoor seating was sparse. I thought it highly unlikely that I hadn’t been noticed by the women on their way to the restroom; indeed, I suspected that the sight of me was what had prompted their conversation. The first woman mumbled an apology, at which point I (sarcastically) assured her that it was fine, and I said something about how I was writing an MA project on aversion to redheads. The second woman, laughing again, said, “See!?! That makes sense!” She reminded me of the unnamed blond woman from Harris’s film, who claimed that the only reason he was making his documentary was because he knew—and accepted—that Gingers were a joke to be laughed at. The first woman appeared to be in her 60s while the second appeared to be in her 50s; they were not schoolyard bullies, or “kids being kids.” What, I wondered, did these women derive personally from their emphatic exchange about the undesirability of people with red hair?

After my initial (emotional) reaction, I tried to use rhetorical listening to retrospectively analyze this situation. Again, boundaries were being drawn. It was clear enough that by explicitly disidentifying with the redhead identity, the women were negotiating their own identities and allaying their insecurities, but just what those insecurities were, precisely, got more frazzled the more I tried to make sense of them. On the one hand, the women revealed their awareness of the constructed nature of the redhead identity, as evidenced by the admission that they had used dyed red hair to claim

this identity for themselves, which they referred to as “the redheaded slut phase.”

However, this was *just* a phase, and it was fake—an act or identity performance of sorts, and therefore not the *true* disposition of either woman. It’s as though they felt that by dying their hair red, they were flirting with transgressing the boundaries of white femininity, and yet they made it clear that this boundary was something they could step back over at any time. What was even more disconcerting was the fact that these women attempted to bar “natural” redheads from the cliché Redhead trope, with their argument that “natural red hair” didn’t look good on anyone. Though I didn’t hear them use the label “Ginger,” clear distinctions were being made between these two, very different tropes about redheads, creating a hierarchy of redheadedness: the Redhead persona was desirable, and it can be obtained through hair dye; the Ginger, however, is fixed: “natural” red hair, as the women put it, evokes the disgust reaction that O’Malley discusses in her work. By deploying the tools of rhetorical listening, I came to hear that these women’s implicit use of the Ginger trope revealed the way that they sought to enforce boundaries around not only whiteness, but white femininity. “Natural” redheads, then, are barred from the constructed Redhead persona—desirable, alluring, wanton, and, apparently, available to any (white) woman to “try on,” so to speak. The Ginger identity, however, is restricted to (and forced upon) those who are born with red hair.

What I ultimately took away from this experience—beyond yet another reminder of the lived, emotional impact of stereotypes—is an up-close understanding of how redheads as a constructed category of “Other” can be used to make whiteness strange, revealing its constructed nature and ever-shifting boundaries. Furthermore, I now have

tools and language to break down these tropes, both for myself and for the friends and family members who previously brushed off my concerns regarding the portrayals of redheads in film and other media. While I, like the authors of the texts I have analyzed, am not entirely immune to the power of the tropes associated with my red hair, this newfound understanding enables me to be more conscious of how (and why) I am identified by others in complex ways as well as how (and why) I myself attempt to identify/disidentify with these tropes. This, of course, does not protect me from the emotional harm caused by the way that others identify me, but it does give me the tools to interrogate and contextualize stereotypes rather than simply internalizing them (and therefore perpetuating them) or trying to brush them off as insignificant.

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