

Hipster Racism – What’s Irony Got to Do With It?

Lena Gotteswinter

Abstract: This essay interrogates the radical political potential concealed within American hipster culture. It seeks to illuminate the current decline of white hipster’s critical habitus, which historically has been conveyed through irony. Contemporary white hipsters seem to rely on nostalgia rather than irony, which can culminate in hipster racism, instead of promoting progressive, liberal lifestyles. This development mirrors a larger shift in American society in which the muddled boundaries between entertainment and politics have become highlighted. To illustrate these developments, the article offers a case study of Gavin McInnes’s hipster performance. McInnes, a comedian and co-founder of the renowned hipster magazine *Vice*, utilizes hipster culture and irony for promoting right-wing causes from within his fraternal organization *Proud Boys*. While McInnes rejects allegations of racism, this article argues from a performance studies perspective that this allegedly satirically *performed* racism still exploits inequality, promotes white supremacy, and has an equally if not more detrimental effect on McInnes’s audience as conventional racism by de-sensitizing people’s awareness of discriminatory practices.¹

About the author: Lena Gotteswinter studied BA English and American Studies and Book Science as well as MA North American Studies: Culture and Literature at FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg. She is currently pursuing a PhD in American Studies at the University of Regensburg, focusing on the contemporary American hipster. This essay is a result of her research on current politicized forms of hipness. Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Udo Hebel

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I love being white and I think it's something to be very proud of [...]. I don't want our culture diluted. We need to close the borders now and let everyone assimilate to a Western, white, English-speaking way of life.

These are not the words of a current Republican politician defending a wall between Mexico and the United States. Rather, these are the words of Gavin McInnes as stated in an interview with Vanessa Grigoriadis from *The New York Times* in 2003. In 1994, McInnes co-founded *Vice* magazine, a magazine that has since been identified as a major medium of hipster culture (Grigoriadis, 2003). In widespread contemporary (stereotypical) understanding, hipness implies liberalism, hedonism, and a cultural avant-garde position outside mainstream culture. McInnes's above comment, however, seems to stand in marked contrast to this understanding of hipness. Instead, it conveys a strong sense of conservatism and white supremacy, which parallels the currently seemingly heightened degree of political and cultural conservatism in the US and Europe. However, McInnes fervently rejects allegations of racism by arguing that comments like the one above are ironic statements made by him as a comedian. While ironic detachment is an integral element of hipness (Lanham, 2003: 12, Tortorici, 2010: 127), in McInnes's case it is not clear in how far irony covers his racist and sexist remarks, especially considering that this 'comedic racism' has fostered the emergence of a fraternal organization called the *Proud Boys*, a conservative group of male Trump supporters founded by McInnes in 2016. If McInnes's assertions about race, gender, and minorities are just a joke, how come this club is engaging in real-life brawls with representatives from the political left?

This article examines the phenomenon of contemporary hipster racism and its ramifications. It interrogates how certain representatives of contemporary white hipster culture might magnify current cultural shifts towards a more conservative and less tolerant society under the cover of individualism and irony – while ignoring historical developments and events. Contemporary white hipness has stereotypically been associated with superficiality. This might be one of the reasons why many white contemporary hipsters do not refer back to the original, subcultural roots of hipness located within African American society as role models. Rather, they reach for white, appropriated forms of hipness. By doing so, these contemporary conservative hipsters do not only devalorize and overwrite the legacy of Black subcultures. In what has become a mainstream phenomenon, they also utilize an initially subcultural and socio-critical habitus to promote values that directly counteract the original liberal agenda of hipness.² This paper specifically wants to argue that

2 Contemporary (white and Black) hipster culture has repeatedly been called out on its break with subcultural values by engaging in capitalist ventures and 'selling out'. Simultaneously, hipness has also been examined with regard to its economic potential, as Michael Scott does in his essay "Hipster Capitalism? in the Age of Austerity? Polanyi Meets Bourdieu's New Petite Bourgeoisie" from 2017.

this increasing conservatism within hipster culture is to a large degree based on an intense engagement with nostalgia as exemplified by the contemporary trend for vintage paraphernalia and naturally limited resources (records instead of streaming programs, typewriters instead of computers – or at least used in communion with high technology). In this context I will also sketch shifts in the concept of irony as integral part of hipness. Identifying and evaluating earlier assertions about the relation between hipness and race, I then explore in how far racism within contemporary white hipster culture can be promoted through irony, revealing hipness as a testing ground for ideological extremism. In a close up on the highly performative figure of the hipster, I examine how McInnes as a representative of hipster culture engages in *hipster racism*³ or what could also be called *performed racism*. In allegedly merely *performing* racism satirically without ever *meaning* it, McInnes utilizes irony as a means to oscillate between different ideological formations and identity deliberations that allow him to walk the line of political correctness while still promoting his right-wing politics. McInnes’s performances illuminate how an intense engagement of white hipster culture combined with the gradual loss of its subcultural dimension and a vast use of irony and nostalgia can foster emerging neo-conservative social movements. This further conveys how an intense sense of individualism and a society that has been governed by visuals (especially on social media) and ever-decreasing attention spans might overlook the potential hazards that are entailed within white hipster culture and its denial of personal accountability through the use of irony. The following observations will illustrate how a seemingly harmless performance of a right-wing stance via the use of subcultural status may have real detrimental effects on a society that has lost the ability to distinguish between pose and politics as well as truth and forgery.

The Hipster: A Cross-Cultural / Cross-Racial Phenomenon

Hipsters have gained a considerable amount of attention across media outlets in the twenty-first century. The contemporary understanding of hipness is rather one-dimensional: hipsters are predominantly perceived as white, male, and middle-class. Although feminism is an increasingly strong focal point within contemporary society and while also female hipsters have been increasingly acknowledged in the media – like Karen O, who is following in the footsteps of Kim Gordon and Patti Smith – it is conspicuous that despite its stereotypical openness and potential for variety, hipness in mainstream

3 The term *hipster racism* has been circulating on the Internet at least since 2007, when Carmen Van Kerckhove acknowledged this phenomenon as a trend in pop culture of 2006. In academia, ‘hipster racism’ became a central topic of analysis only in 2018 in essays like Brewer Current and Tillotson’s “Hipster Racism and Sexism in Charity Date Auctions” from 2018, in which the authors critically reflect on the racism and white supremacy embodied in on-campus charity date auctions, in which the participants mirrored the conventions of slave auctions.

media's representations still does not display great variety with respect to race or gender. This marginalization of women within hipster culture is deeply paradoxical, as hipness has always embraced femininity and the oscillation between gender identities and sexualities. (Leland, 2005: 242f.) But also in its racial dimensions this hegemony of white male hipsters seems poignantly ironic, considering the genesis of hipness. Originally, hipness has Black roots, having been born in the contact zone of Black and white culture during 17th-century US slavery (Leland, 2005: 17f.) – an origin which many contemporary hipsters are not aware of. In a similar vein, the reading list of Robert Lanham's notorious *Hipster Handbook* includes barely any writers of color as literary hipster prophets (2003: 126ff.) But without Black culture, hipness would not exist as it does today – it is a distinct phenomenon of the contact zone resulting from the cruelties of slavery.

Mary Louise Pratt establishes the term contact zone as describing “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (1991: 34). In the case of hipness, Black and white cultures have met in a hierarchical relationship in which both of these cultures tried to come to terms with each other and their roles within this social dynamic. While this relationship definitely was afflicted by the terrors and violence of slavery, it also marked the beginning of a mutual cultural influence, as over decades whites appropriated Black culture, while Blacks also engaged with white culture (Leland, 2005: 6). These cross-cultural mechanisms and developments are addressed in-depth in John Leland's *Hip: The History*. Leland shows how the roots of hipness can be traced back to enslaved Black Africans who were shipped to the United States as part of the Triangular Slave Trade. Forced to come to terms with an alienating country, Black slaves developed a “subversive intelligence” reacting to these new circumstances with their own kind of language and behavioral patterns (Leland, 2005: 5f.). This created a process of cultural appropriation and imitation (Leland, 2005: 18f.). Illustrating this ongoing oscillation between cultural spheres (also going beyond the realm of race), Leland identifies hipness as “an aesthetic of the hybrid” (2005: 51), a hybridity that speaks to the conflation of differences, of high and low culture: “Born in the dance between black and white, hip thrives on juxtaposition and pastiche” (Leland, 2005: 11).

Also earlier writers like Norman Mailer have addressed the effects of this close, but also violent contact between Black and white culture. In his article *The White Negro* (1957), an essay steeped in white supremacist rhetoric, seemingly foreshadowing McInnes's stance, he identifies appropriating Black social life as a coping mechanism for white Americans. As Mailer argues, these Americans were confronted with an age of conformity as well as existential fears in the wake of World War II, forced to come to terms with the random and constant threat of a nuclear war. Moreover, the experiences of the Ho-

locust were taking their toll on the American psyche (Mailer, 1957: 344f.). In consequence, white Americans relied on African Americans’ methods of dealing with the immediacy of death, a threat Blacks were confronted with on a daily basis (Mailer, 1957: 346f.). This coping method entailed a great deal of hedonism, a reverence for the presence, and a withdrawal from the reach of social conventions and mores in a heightened worship of individualism (Mailer, 1957: 361ff.).

While stereotypical contemporary hipsters seem to be very different from *original* hipsters in their racial identity, there are still some core characteristics that hipsters have continued to embody over the years. One of these is *a priori* knowledge as described in 1948 by Anatole Broyard. Talking about Black hipsters, Broyard describes this as a certain kind of knowledge that the rest of society cannot access and which is embodied for example in “jive language.” (1948: 721ff.). Today this translates into the anticipative tendency of hipsters to predict – and pre-exercise – trends before they seep into the mainstream. Moreover, hipsters deliberately position themselves against the mainstream (Lanham, 2003: 12f.). They do so, for example, via fashion, which – together with music – is a major characteristic for identifying hipsters, as Robert Lanham emphasizes in his satirical work *The Hipster Handbook* (2003: 12). Fashion and music can also become valuable amplifiers of authenticity and individuality. These are features which hipsters value above all but which – ironically – are usually carefully constructed (Maly and Varis, 2016: 644f.). This identity curation often takes the form of *conspicuous consumption*⁴. In this special form of conspicuous consumption, hipsters draw on what Thornton (with reference to Bourdieu) calls subcultural capital:

Subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder. [...] Subcultural capital can be *objectified* or *embodied*. [...] [It] is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections [...] [and] embodied in the form of being ‘in the know’, using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles. (Thornton, 2003: 11f)

Subcultural capital thus transfers the status that individuals draw from cultural capital – according to Bourdieu – to the more underground sphere of subcultures, which ascribe value to markers of status that are very different from the ones of bourgeois society. This specific form of capital is based on *a priori* knowledge and seems to present a mode of its practical application.

Additionally, hipsters in the twenty-first century seem to be invested in a sense of nostalgia, which is oftentimes directed towards memories of their own childhood (Greif: Positions, 2010: 11). A further common conception about (white) hipsters is that they are stereotypically college-educated rep-

4 In his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen describes conspicuous consumption as a behavioral pattern in which the consumption of specific, usually unnecessary goods is used to convey a certain (financial) status.

representatives of the (upper) middle class.⁵ One characteristic of hipness that seems to have become especially pronounced in the twenty-first century is irony. While irony has always played a role in the hipster's identity, it seems to have taken such a prominent role that nobody expects anyone anymore to be earnest in their statements. This is visible in the structure and choice of characters of movies like *(500) Days of Summer* as well as in various articles on the *age of irony*, which seems to have been announced (and declared dead) at the same time as hipsters have been gaining social status and cultural relevance. However, in the aftermath of 9/11, the journalist Roger Rosenblatt (amongst others) argued that these attacks on this historic date might signify the end of the cultural dominance of irony (2001) – but actually, they did not, as irony was rather used to come to terms with what had happened (Kakutani, 2001). In fact, the ironic hipster habitus might have been a result of this use of irony as a coping mechanism for the tragedy of the attacks on the World Trade Center.

The meaning of irony has shifted and transformed considerably, not only in recent years – although these shifts might seem the most poignant to us. While Claire Colebrook's excellent monograph *Irony* offers an extensive examination of the history and theory of irony, I would merely like to include her evaluation of irony's dominant role in contemporary culture. She argues that in postmodernity, "our very historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says. We live in a world of quotation, pastiche, simulation and cynicism: a general and all-encompassing irony" (Colebrook, 2006: 1). The status of irony apparently has developed from a rhetorical device to an ideological stance. Hipness seems to present a metaphor for this development, illustrating a lost sense of the truly countercultural while pastiche and bricolage take over on an exclusively aesthetic level.

In hipness, irony has served the function of a method of socio-political scrutiny as well as a coping mechanism for the despair of living in an instable and both threatened and threatening environment. However, irony might also become a critical mechanism again. Linda Hutcheon has acknowledged this dominance of *both irony and nostalgia* in the twenty-first century in her essay *Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern* (2000: 192). She argues that nostalgia can function as a coping mechanism in the face of an unsatisfying present society with a variety of concomitant anxieties, longing for a better past. However, as to her, there is one caveat: "This is rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire" (Hutcheon, 2000: 195).

Finally, as a third option, irony also seems to be used these days without any reference to the past for purely hedonistic, seemingly uncritical purposes. Cassar in his satirical self-educational and humorously illustrated book *How to Spot a Hipster* makes an assertion to this end when arguing that irony has become a blanket excuse for "[s]aying, doing and wearing things that you know

5 Lanham for example offers as a clear indication for hipsters a degree from a liberal arts school (2003: 2).

are uncool because it’s hilarious.” (2016: 62)⁶ Here, irony offers contemporary hipsters the possibility of exploring dimensions of contemporary life that are not accepted either by mainstream or subcultural society. By concealing inappropriate or unpopular behavior under the cover of irony, hipsters do not run the risk of alienating either while simultaneously finding a way to engage in individualistic hedonism. From the historic investment of hipsters in irony, it seems that the *aesthetic function* of the concept may survive, while its critical dimension has been largely lost.

This paper, and referring specifically to hipster culture, argues that irony can become a mechanism of detaching oneself from a life that seems threatening, uncertain, and unmanageable (even through its mere vastness, e.g. the oversupply of possibilities which makes it impossible to make a single choice). What I perceive to be a rise in irony in my analysis thus constitutes a contemporary parallel to the status of hipness as a coping mechanism. In recent years, our society has been confronted with a variety of immediate threats: financial crises, environmental concerns, and random acts of terrorism. It seems that hipness as a mechanism to retreat into individualism and aesthetics instead of having to deal with reality has been reinvigorated as a coping mechanism in the face of psychological and physical stress (even if it might only be *perceived* stress) of the twenty-first century. In the course of this essay, I will exemplify this notion of hip nostalgia as a specific coping mechanism for these anxieties, unwelcome changes, and uncertainties, and how this specific reaction to contemporary threats can foster a turn to the past and the promotion of a regressive and suppressive ideology. With hipness shifting into the mainstream now, this can represent a serious problem for our culture and the status and relevance of contemporary subcultures. That is to say: What if the inappropriate or unpopular behavior which irony is meant to conceal crosses the line to discrimination?

Contemporary Hipster Racism

Contemporary hipster racism – as most of hipster culture – has not been widely acknowledged or researched by the academia. Mostly, one encounters accounts in online articles about contemporary trends or written by victims targeted by this kind of racism (Van Kerckhove, 2007; Ransome, 2017). But what exactly is hipster racism? Does it describe racists who also just happen to be hipsters? Or does it describe hipsters who have become racists? I argue that hipster racism is an idiosyncratic form of racism that emerges specifically within hipster culture. It deliberately feeds off the irony that is inherently

6 Although hipsters have not been widely discussed within academia, there is a great variety of style guides or handbooks about hipsters available, often written in a satirical or polemical tone. These do not only offer insight on what shapes the hipster habitus, they also exemplify the stereotypically derisive reaction to hipness and its permeation of contemporary popular culture.

linked to hipness, which in fact enables hipster racism to emerge in the first place. While this kind of racism does not necessarily presuppose deliberately malign objectives, it bears witness to a deliberate negligence and experimentation regarding the acceptability of specific forms of racial discourse and behavior. In this, it again is strongly linked to hipsters' focus on aesthetics and displaying a certain kind of subcultural capital.

In a pointed article for *Vive*, Black journalist Noel Ransome offers a list of instances of hipster racism to help the reader identify if they are employing this form of racism (2017). As to Ransome, hipster racists often appropriate Black culture and speech in a feeling of entitlement because they have a Black friend. This friend is instrumentalized as a shield whenever they voice "some 'unintentionally' racist thing" in order to defy any accusations of supremacy (Ransome, 2017). Hipster racists also tend to "play devil's advocate," concealing their own opinions by referring to someone else's assertions and thus "[reducing] racism to a political disagreement" (Ransome, 2017). Ransome also argues that hipsters pretend to be colorblind, meaning to not even notice or care for skin color. This might be classified as what Oluo describes as well-intentioned hipster racism (2015). Oluo maintains that hipsters think they can say racist things because they believe that racism is not an issue anymore in contemporary society. By doing so, hipster racism makes use of the concept of post-racialism, which Cho defines

[as] a twenty-first-century ideology that reflects a belief that due to the significant racial progress that has been made, the state need not engage in race-based decision-making or adopt race-based remedies, and that civil society should eschew race as a central organizing principle of social action. (2009: 1594)

However, denying ongoing racial inequalities within American society through hipster racism only further consolidates and absolves white supremacy. Professing that many do not know when they are being racist, Oluo promotes a distinction between racists and racist actions, trying to spark a conversation about these differences to educate people rather than drawing battle lines. But Ransome seems more skeptical and rather describes the notion of colorblindness as an important problem of deliberate, not unintentional action. As to him, contemporary colorblind hipsters may pretend to be tolerant, but they also disavow the racial conflicts and problems that are still governing American society and Black lives today.

The foundation for all of this hipster racism is of course, once again, irony, for example deliberately marked out by an "I'm just joking!" after a racist slur (Ransome, 2017). Under the protective coat of irony, people can make all kinds of claims and assertions, without risking to actually forsake their solidified privileged position and social acceptance. Hipsters' surface-orientation in this case again helps to promote hipster racism, as a distinctive hipster fashion style already prepares the onlookers to expect a kind of irony that by now

has been deeply ingrained in the public perception of hipster culture. One individual who has been remarkably successful in using this technique and who paradoxically has managed to re-approach bourgeois values as well as an intense kind of conservatism under the cover of hipness is Gavin McInnes.

“Racism Does Not Exist” – Gavin McInnes and the Changing Face of Irony⁷

While McInnes offers an insightful illustration of the mechanisms and *stratagems* of contemporary white hipster racism, I want to make clear that he is offering an extreme kind of hipness that has segued into highly problematic ideological and political positions. This is to say, while McInnes displays a distinctly *hip* form of racism, this does, of course, not mean that all hipsters are automatically racists. Still, he exemplifies how hipness is a habitus that is far from trivial and that should be considered in all its political potential.

Canadian-born Gavin McInnes co-founded *Vice* magazine in 1994 and thus gave birth to a major outlet of hipster culture that has developed from a North American magazine into a global franchise. Although it has been considered a promoter of hipness across the globe, *Vice* paradoxically has also been seen as commodifying hipness and selling the subculture to the mainstream (Grigoriadis, 2003). Notorious elements of *Vice* are its lack of political correctness and its “embracing [of] a frat-boy crudity and ethnic stereotypes” (Grigoriadis, 2003). *Vice* seems to cater to precisely the same kind of hipster racism sketched out above, negotiating the boundary between irony and sincerity under the cover of hipness.

Having separated from the company in 2008 due to “creative differences,” McInnes seems to have found a new outlet for this ironic hipster racism, calling into question if this racism is still ironic for him: a right-wing fraternal organization called the *Proud Boys* (Feuer, 2018). Already early in his career, McInnes has been targeted for his racist and sexist behavior and utterances. He has continuously been playing with his status in the entertainment industry, hosting or appearing in satirical as well as serious formats, as he acknowledges himself (McInnes, 2018). He also alternately presents himself in various roles to the outside world. These performances as a variety of personae, with the boundaries between these personae blurring, are a major issue in identifying his assertions as serious or satiric. For one, he is called the “godfather of hipsterdom” (Ziegbe, 2010), a comedian who makes vast use of the concept of irony and who has a large following. For another he performs as the *Proud Boys* leader, promoting conservative values while again using a certain degree of humor. Then there is also the persona of his online video shows and podcasts, which seems to be a convergence between the

⁷ In his essay *Epitaph for the White Hipster*, an exploration of the association of hipness with whiteness in the twenty-first-century, Mark Greif also briefly addresses Gavin McInnes’s right-wing assertions – and the question of whether or not he is being serious. (155ff).

hipster character and the politically engaged *Proud Boy*. And finally, he uses his role as a husband and father to counteract any accusations of sexism or racism, presenting himself – for example in a video in which he quits the *Proud Boys* – as a loving and unwitting father who is victimized by leftist journalism and politics. For this purpose, he shows a clip allegedly exemplifying his non-racist stance, which includes what seems to be home video footage of him with his children – in what appears to be a move to market him as a harmless, common man dedicated to providing for his family (McInnes, 2018).

But this last position does not seem to go well with his past, as McInnes has explicitly taken pride in “having converted Vice readers to conservatism,” most of whom do not seem to be aware of the level of seriousness entailed in McInnes’s words (Grigoriadis, 2003). This conversion seems to reinforce the assertion that hipsters might be moving towards more bourgeois and conservative values. After an interview with McInnes, Grigoriadis reported how he declared his pride in white culture. In the aftermath of the publication of this article, however, McInnes admitted to regretting not having said “Western” instead of “white” (Haupt, 2017).⁸ Nevertheless, this does not necessarily rectify his image as much as he would assume, as it still conveys a racist stance. What seems particularly unsettling about McInnes and his following are the excuses that some fans seem to be making for the discriminatory language he uses:

Some people assume that such [politically incorrect] remarks are posturing, akin to the ethnic and anti-gay slurs that pepper the pages of *Vice*, establishing its rebel credentials. They argue that for 20-somethings raised in a multicultural society, ethnic slurs – part of contemporary street patois – do not have the sting they do for older generations. (Grigoriadis, 2003)

While these assertions are more than questionable, McInnes’s most recent media-effective position as the founder of the *Proud Boys* has shed new, even harsher light on him. Founded in 2016 under the motto *The West Is the Best*, the *Proud Boys* represent what McInnes calls “Western chauvinism” (Haupt, 2017).⁹ However, they are disassociating themselves from any allegations

8 What exactly McInnes means by Western remains unclear. Considering his assertions, it can be assumed that he is primarily referring to the United States. However, his focus on Western also seems to imply a polarizing juxtaposition of West and East, presenting the East as the Other and thus the negative to the positive West. Edward Said has described this projection of negative qualities on Eastern cultures as orientalism, a concept which he explores at length in his eponymous book (1995).

9 Also in this case, McInnes does not clarify what Western chauvinists are, exactly. While chauvinism usually describes either an intense form of nationalism which designates one’s own culture as superior to other cultures or an understanding of men being superior to women – both of which are generally negative meanings – McInnes does not seem to see it this way. Rather, it seems that he understands chauvinism as taking pride in one’s culture, more akin to American Exceptionalism.

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of racism or sexism. Having been accused of being an extremist right-wing group, McInnes asserts:

We are not far-right or ultranationalist. We are primarily libertarian family men who tend to be against open borders and are for free markets. We think there’s two genders. We love Trump. Normal dad stuff. (McInnes, 2018)

As this statement shows, McInnes downplays these accusations and argues that the *Proud Boys* are simply a club of men who get together to drink beer and who engage in what he calls “dad politics” (McInnes, 2018). Not only does he evoke images of a college fraternity with the organizational structure and ideology of the *Proud Boys* here – a shrewd move in itself, as fraternities are often regarded with an indulgent eye by authorities, downplaying them as rascals and their (stereotypically often sexist) behavior as pranks. But in his defensive statements, McInnes also harkens back to a conservative kind of politics as practiced by earlier generations, in which patriarchy remained uncontested and racial debates were far from politically correct or considerate of issues of diversity. These values seem to speak of an anxiety about threatened manhood and male status through gender equality and social progress – for which hipness might present an outlet. Moreover, by promoting this ideology, McInnes shifts the concept of hipster nostalgia from the reflective to the restorative realm, to use Svetlana Boym’s terms. Boym distinguishes two different kinds of nostalgia, restorative and reflective:

Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. [...] Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time. (2001: 41)

While stereotypical twenty-first-century hipsters have displayed a strong reverence for nostalgia, it usually is rather innocent and harmless. In general, they do not seem willing to actually return to the past and its respective conditions, i.e. to conservative gender roles and responsibilities or – more pragmatically – to a world without modern technology. While conventionally, hipster nostalgia was relegated to this kind of romanticized fantasies of the past, i.e. reflective nostalgia, McInnes makes the jump to restorative nostalgia, which is largely employed by nationalist groups (Boym, 2001: 41) – and which is also implied in Donald Trump’s slogan *Make America Great Again*. The *Proud Boys* seem especially eager to restore times of uncontested masculinity and male community in their behavior. The shift in this form of hipster nostalgia thus constitutes an additional hint at the deeply conservative underbelly of

this organization. In reaction to the *Proud Boys*' perpetration of conservative, right-wing ideology, the Southern Poverty Law Center has classified the collective as a hate group, among others for its "anti-Muslim and misogynistic rhetoric" (SPLC).

However, the Southern Poverty Law Center is precisely whom McInnes is now suing for slander, calling for donations on his website *Defend Gavin*, in order to help him "restore free speech in America" (McInnes, 2020). Is this irony, his true agenda, or just a desperate attempt to shield himself from actual legal prosecution? McInnes's declarations of the *Proud Boys* not being a sexist or racist group have become particularly heightened by a fairly recent event in New York City. In October 2018, McInnes was invited to give a talk at a Republican club located in the city. Having chosen a rather controversial topic, McInnes's

speech was nominally meant to commemorate the 1960 murder of a Japanese socialist by an ultranationalist assassin, but Mr. McInnes peppered it with mocking attacks on leftists, lesbians and people in the Black Lives Matter movement. (Feuer and Winston, 2018)

After the talk, a brawl between *Proud Boys* and *antifa*¹⁰ representatives ensued, with some of the *Proud Boys* being arrested (Feuer and Winston, 2018). In a video following these arrests, McInnes then disassociated himself from this fraternal organization – expressly in order to alleviate the sentence of the arrested members (McInnes, 2018). In this video he does not only repeatedly emphasize that the *Proud Boys* are not a racist or sexist group, he also stresses emphatically that [w]hite nationalism is not a thing," disavowing the "myth of toxic masculinity" (McInnes, 2018). In this video McInnes specifically emphasizes that his politically incorrect remarks in the past were all not serious, referring to his mere use of what he calls "hyperbolic language" (McInnes, 2018).

The fact that he has hosted a variety of media formats complicates the conceptualization of his public persona, his political stance, and his conceivability. McInnes exploits this complication by fervently asserting: "When you hear quotes that sound racist or anti-Semitic, you are hearing a joke taken out of context" (McInnes, 2018). He thus employs a blanket absolution for whatever utterance may potentially be used against him. Moreover, although he admits to having used harsh language in the past when talking about violence, he argues that he only ever promoted it as self-defense (McInnes, 2018). Attempting to further reverse the perception of him as perpetrator, he even goes so far as to claim that the *Proud Boys* are in fact the victims who are forced to defend themselves against the violence coming from the liberal community (McInnes, 2018). DiAngelo describes this mechanism of

¹⁰ In general, *antifa* refers to representatives of the *anti-fascist* movement or individuals associated with the political left.

whites to counter-attack when being accused of racism as white fragility in her eponymous essay, describing this concept as

a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium (2011: 54).

McInnes seems to engage in all of these behaviors, displaying his deep personal unsettlement with questions of race, despite his verbally and visually performed racist attitudes.

McInnes has voiced these in the racist, sexist, homophobic, and otherwise discriminatory sentences uttered in his online news shows and podcasts as well as his book *The Death of Cool*. Although the online videos are usually prefixed with a still image containing a disclaimer, saying that “This content is rated ‘rebellious’. Viewer discretion is advised. Includes satire & mature content” (e.g. Rebel News, 2015) it still leaves the audience wondering how much of it actually is satire. Here are two examples of sentences uttered in these videos: “Men are not catcalling women that don’t want it. Catcalling is not a bad thing. If men got catcalled they [sic] love it...they would love it” (Rebel News: Straight White Man, 2017); “Racism does not exist” (Rebel News, 2015). In the video which includes the latter quote, McInnes relativizes his assertion, but only in so far that he argues that racism exists only in a miniscule dimension so that it is “statistically irrelevant” and does not represent actual reality (Rebel News, 2015). This again either conveys a deeply post-racial attitude or a form of ignorance, both very problematic attitudes. Still, what is the audience to do with these kinds of assertions?

Across various media outlets, writers have been wondering just how much of McInnes’s performed racism and sexism is true (e.g. Houpt, 2017). The reason for this inconclusiveness is his method of performing. He does not only state racist claims, but he cloaks and complicates his assertions in his use of exaggerations and playful wit, mixing facts and fictions, and even performing in different outfits, which might draw laughter from the unwitting audience while distracting from his discriminatory language.¹¹ But does it even matter, whether or not he intends to be racist, or should we look at his statements with *intentional fallacy* in mind? McInnes uses particular kinds of strategies to conceal possibly offensive language and ideas. Like white hipsters using their Black friends as bulwarks against allegations of racism, McInnes refers back to his wife – who partly is of American Indian ancestry – when being confronted with racism (Houpt, 2017).

11 In one *YouTube*-video, McInnes for example argues that Donald Trump’s refusal to let transgenders enter military service was a good decision – while wearing a wig, jewelry, and nothing but a bra (Rebel News: Trump’s Military, 2017).

But, again, this does not give McInnes the liberty to discriminate against other cultures, no matter how ironic he claims to be and no matter how much he relegates his remarks to the performativity of humor. As West argues, hipster racism does not become acceptable merely because it is ironic, as this kind of racism still allows people to draw benefits from racism. Hipster racism also nevertheless exploits unequal power dynamics, making it just as unacceptable as its upfront sibling (West, 2012). Therefore, McInnes's deflection of racist allegations to the ethnicity of his wife does not counteract his racism. In a similarly defensive vein, McInnes points out that the *Proud Boys* is a group of men with all kinds of different backgrounds, including homosexuals and minorities (McInnes, 2018). However, this apparently does not stop him from voicing racist and sexist remarks.

The problem which gives rise to the increasing confusion about McInnes's true agenda stems from the fact that he lets the different roles described above (the comedian, the political individual, the private person) blur into each other without delineating clearly which register belongs to which domain – a problem that he also openly acknowledges (McInnes, 2018). However, in contrast to him, who emphasizes this issue in order to illustrate how he cannot be blamed for using satire, I argue that this method might also be a very cunning application of hipster racism in order to disseminate right-wing motifs and ideology among a large audience, literally free of charge. These problematics are also strongly connected to the respective setting and audience of his performances, both of which are decisive components of any kind of performance.

For his online videos, it might be easier to declare that these are meant ironically. Many of these videos can be accessed on *YouTube*, a platform that is stereotypically associated with seemingly trivial content like make-up, amateur music, and cat videos. However, what about McInnes's political appearances at conservative rallies (Haupt, 2017)? Considering the audiences there, likely to be made up of conservatives or even right-wing advocates, McInnes cannot expect that these listeners will consider everything he says to be satire. Also, why would he want to speak at these rallies, as rallies are usually intended to foster communal support with regard to a specific issue at least, if he did not want to participate in exactly this cause?

Finally, if one also considers his performance at the Metropolitan Republican Club in New York City, it seems conspicuous that a commemoration of the assassination of a Japanese socialist should take place in front of a Republican audience. What is being commemorated, the successful assassination of this politician or the politician? A problem that arises with this particular performance is McInnes's apparent lack of knowledge of the meaning and definition of irony and satire.

By defending himself and the *Proud Boys*, McInnes shows in his video of resignation a clip from his speech at the Republican Club. In this video,

his performance just seems to be coming to an end¹² and the audience is laughing. Commenting on this clip, McInnes claims: “It was a clearly satirical stand-up routine and everyone had a good time” (McInnes, 2018). It seems implicit here that he considers the audience’s reaction a legitimization of the satirical status of his reenactment of an assassination. Apparently, in his understanding, even if he had not deliberately performed satire, the audience would have made his performance satiric through their reaction. However, once again, the respective audience and the setting have to be considered. As the audience presumably mostly consisted of people who are close to the Republican party, which usually positions itself against communism and socialism, this audience might well condone McInnes’s performance. It seems that he believes that, as long as people laugh, he can use irony and satire as a protective coat for right-wing assertions.

Considering McInnes’s behavior and output, I claim that, regardless of him being serious or not, his own stance upon the matter is relevant only to a secondary degree. No matter how he perceives it and whether or not he wants to take a prominent role in the dissemination of right-wing politics, the *effect* of his performances on his audience and also his opponents remains the same, no matter if it is only satirically *performed* racism or *actual* racism. With his performances, McInnes has already garnered a considerably large following, allegedly with chapters of *Proud Boys* in different parts of the world (McInnes, 2018). The media also continue to respond to him, either supporting or condemning him and further embodying the current chasm between left and right in American society that has been widening with Donald Trump’s presidency. The individual Gavin McInnes might therefore not even be relevant anymore. Whether or not he is an extremely cunning right-wing perpetrator or just a surface-oriented hipster addicted to public acknowledgement and scandal, whose game has entirely gone out of control, seems a minor concern. What seems more important is the acknowledgment of the political potential that seems to be reinstated in hipness in this case.

However, although it mirrors chauvinistic and racist rhetoric of hipster figures from the past like Mailer, the political potential of hipness here is transferred more to the political right, countering the subcultural values that hipness embodied in its original development. And, in a final poignant observation, McInnes illustrates how allegedly trivial, ironic entertainment culture – as contemporary hipster culture has become associated with superficiality and triviality – embodied by one single person can be used to infiltrate politics to an unexpected degree, thus catering to an increasingly individualized, aesthetically focused, surface-oriented, and media-hyperactive postmodern society and unveiling the very real, detrimental effects this can have.

¹² It seems rather conspicuous that McInnes does not include a short clip in which more of what he said *during* this performance can be heard.

Conclusion

In reviewing the role that race, racism, and irony have played in hipster culture in the past, the current prominent combination of the latter two in postmodern society stands in the well-established tradition of the prefix *post*. Both continuing and breaking with the traditional values of hipster culture concerning these concepts, contemporary hipster racism seems to target a new set of anxieties, be it concerning finances, terroristic threats, the dissolution of designated gender roles, or ongoing racial inequality and white fragility. It seems that McInnes deliberately and cunningly uses the hipster habitus, which he still openly embodies – for example in his hipster-nerdy style – and which he of course is famous for, in order to mobilize millennials back into politics and into the field of right-wing policies specifically. By using irony as a *Get Out of Jail Free* card, he has been granted a considerable amount of time to toe the line of political correctness and legal disapproval. While this introduces politics back into the hipster phenomenon, which has largely been described as “anti-political” in the twenty-first century (Greif: *Positions*, 2010: 6), it also denotes a highly paradoxical process moving against the Black origins of hipness and the liberal, subcultural status that hipsters have occupied in the past.

Although McInnes can be easily demonized as an inimical figure due to his behavior, his individual character is not the important element of the observations made in this essay. Rather, McInnes becomes interesting in current times because of what he *stands for*. He embodies a shift towards populism that has been going through the American society and various other societies around the world. His public persona illustrates how a seemingly trivial and surface-oriented concept like hipness can in fact be instrumentalized to conceal political propaganda – while we are all watching. Hipster racism illustrates how an overuse of irony in the past may have made us insensitive and incapable of distinguishing between reality and farce, between danger and entertainment in a case of collective historical amnesia concerning the terrible global history of racism and its violent effects.

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