

Editing for Partisanship: Citizen-Made Art and Populist Aesthetics

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Abstract Donald Trump's presidency deserves to be remembered for its art, but not the art patronized by the first couple or White House cultural events celebrated American expressive traditions and innovations. Trump's populist moment, from the 2016 campaign through his tumultuous exit and return to the presidency, should be remembered, among other things, for the varied and unconventional citizen-made art that it inspired. His presidencies emboldened citizens of different political persuasions to participate in, display, exchange and sell their idiosyncratic artworks. The art that best exemplifies the Trump era's populist politics is not fine art, but rather art by, of and for the people, crafted with common tools and made to speak to the specifics of the moment in its visual and aural vernacular rather than transcend it. For populist movements in the US, from the frontier to the present, popular culture has been the mode and medium of exchange that has performed the vital task of creating political (and oppositional) community and shared, but not monolithic, identity as "the people." In this moment, the aesthetics of "the people" is not found in formal traits that are shared among works, but in a relational aesthetic – one of domination. Through analysis of two small, digital works, this essay examines two aspects of this: the aestheticization of domination, through violence and ridicule; and the power to re-signify objects to ventriloquize them as partisan, erasing previous meanings and histories.

Keywords Populism, DIY, Trump, Digital Media, Political Media

Introduction

Donald Trump's first term deserves to be remembered for its art, but not the art patronized by the first couple or White House cultural events that valorized and celebrated American expressive traditions and innovations. Trump's populist moment, from the 2016 campaign through his tumultuous exit from his first presidency and its ignominious afterlife, should be remembered for the varied and unconventional citizen-made art that it inspired. From tens of thousands of hand-knit pink "pussy hats" to handmade yard signs, flags, Trump-decorated houses, partisan kitsch, countless memes and tribute videos, and the "Baby Trump"-balloon, Trump's candidacy and presidency inspired creativity and the urge to share it publicly. Trump's first presidency (for this essay, the term presidency will refer to Trump's campaign, presidency and the ongoing post-presidential political life up to his reelection) emboldened citizens of different political persuasions to participate in, display, exchange, and sell their idiosyncratic artworks.

The art that best exemplifies the Trump era's populist politics is not fine art, but rather art by, of and for the people, crafted with common tools and made to speak to the specifics of the moment rather than transcend it.¹ In this milieu, most populist creative expressions utilize digital tools as their canvas and social media as their gallery. Even if some of these designs are eventually made into t-shirts, coffee mugs or other physical objects, most begin in the digital realm. Media of digital origin, like tribute music videos, edited photographs and memes, are well suited for exchange on social media. Others, like t-shirts, hats, graffiti and home installations, are often photographed and shared using common platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. This potential for exchange and participation within the attention economy of new media is essential to the modern populist ecosystem, just as the postal service was to frontier populists as they distributed their newsletters and pamphlets (Postel), and the radio to Depression-era populists (Kazin). In both cases, media is used to share stories, craft responses to current affairs, and create a sense of strength and solidarity, combating isolation and despondence. For populist movements in the US, from the frontier to the present, popular culture has been the mode and medium of exchange that

has performed the vital task of creating political community and shared, but not monolithic, identity as “the people.”

Following Stuart Hall, popular culture is a space of contestation, where new identities, interpretations and representations are worked out (see Hall). This is what makes the study of populist art – in particular art shared on social media, which can be digitally edited and re-shared – important to an analysis of the contemporary political moment. Citizen-made political art, populist art in the sense of being *of the people*, is a window into both contemporary populist identity and the mechanisms through which these new identities are formed and adapted in a society being transformed by digital culture and commerce. In this uneven post-industrial development, where traditional hierarchies have been flattened or dismantled, the old has lost relevance and the new has not yet emerged (see Frazier), popular art making and exchange on social media is a space where new political expressions and identities are being experimented with. It is also where issues of representation are addressed through aesthetic objects and processes. In the case of Trump style populism, both the content and forms of popular art are subjected to processes that collectively create a populist aesthetic. This aesthetic is not necessarily comprised of specific formal properties; it is more an aesthetics of domination, where the process of convincingly transforming a neutral or even progressive object into a pro-Trump signifier is key. The following analysis investigates a contemporary populist aesthetic that is no less ideological than previous aesthetic regimes (Eagleton), but is constituted by a process of domination and resignification rather than by creating a coherent unity between art’s outward properties and its encoded philosophies.

This essay focuses on two examples: a thirty-second music video uploaded to Twitter in September 2020 by a Trump staffer, shared by Donald Trump and imitated by others (before many were removed or accounts were deleted), and a drawing by Joey Macalle, originally done for a review of Kristin Kobes Du Mez’s scathing “Jesus and John Wayne” in *The Boston Globe*, that was appropriated and made into a pro-Trump poster and print. While the political significance of these two is modest at best (they did not sway the election or seem to have the game changing power that Lyndon Johnson’s “Daisy” ad did in 1964; see Mann), the music video Tweet and re-sig-

nified poster are indicative of ways that citizens use new media and digital technologies to aesthetically engage with contemporary populism. By taking a news clip of #BLM protests in Portland, Oregon, and setting it to 80s yacht rock, Dan Scavino, the Trump White House's director of social media, outlined a new technique for political influencing: using music to recontextualize footage of a politically charged event. Scavino provided the road map to a low-cost, DIY practice through which citizens can affirm their populist identities and participate in the movement by producing similar variations. This simple creative act inspired numerous imitations, as Trump supporters created their own versions of the same video clip with different music, each adding a layer of signification to the video, while maintaining the same populist ethos. This type of technological mimesis (see Zulli and Zulli) relates to both the design of the platform (which forms it allows and encourages) and the immediacy with which new digital art can be created for public exchange using a template and slight variation, to reinforce political affect and identity. The re-framing of Macalle's drawing is even simpler. By simply removing a drawing from its original context, away from Chrissy Stroop's book review, and marketing it to a pro-Trump audience, the image is stripped of its snarky critique and becomes household kitsch, aestheticizing domestic space with partisanship. In this case, Macalle's drawing, when read literally, resonates with other populist art that positions Trump alongside Jesus, angels, apostles and other Biblical figures. In this case, Trump devotees were primed to see Trump's affiliation with conservative heroes like John Wayne and "white" Jesus without irony.

The following close readings lead to two conclusions, one that speaks to the role of new digital media processes in political identity formation, and a second that offers insight into the aesthetic dimensions and ideologies of contemporary conservative populism. As two examples among many of citizen-made populist art, these show that citizens are making (or appropriating) art to reinforce and participate in Trump's populist movement (see Patch 2021). Partisans are using art to both fill in the meanings of politically expedient signifiers — protest, rights, justice, Christianity, masculinity — and to include themselves in the category of "the people," an empty signifier waiting to be filled with meaning and specificity (Laclau and Moffitt 2020). The availability and spreadability (see Jenkins et al.) of new media make it an essential tool

in creating the kind of social relationships of exchange and camaraderie that are essential to US populism going back to frontier days (Turner), as well as a canvas on which to witness identities being created and contested.

These two examples show that contemporary conservative populism exhibits the will to dominate, control and exclude rather than the humane and democratic impulses of some earlier populist movements in the US (see Goodwyn, Postel, Clanton, Canovan for examples). Macalle's work positions Trump in between a caricature of John Wayne, masculine hero of post-Civil Rights and Women's Rights conservatism, and white Jesus holding a cracked world in his hand. Rather than the savage critique of the modern Christian Right that it was intended to be, this image becomes a celebration of White Christian Nationalism and patriarchy. Scavino's music video is not a call for inclusion and dignity in the face of elite power or an appeal for the right to be heard and represented that is found in the most noble visions of American populism. Rather, the video exemplifies another undercurrent of American populism: a desire to select and enforce who is classified as "American" and entitled to share in the wealth of the nation, and which groups are derided, excluded, and dehumanized. While the will to dominate is clear from the tone of the video — it deploys ridicule in the face of protest and pain — I believe it is also embedded in processes of creation that are based in appropriation and radical re-signification.

Populism in Theory

Definitions of populism are varied, contingent and contested. However, the contours of populism's many articulations have similarities. In the US context, Kazin defines populism in two ways. The first is, "a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter" (Kazin 1). He goes on to say that populism is "more an impulse than an ideology" and is employed as "a flexible mode of persuasion" (3). In these premises, Kazin's work connects to political theorists who approach populism through a discursive-performative approach (Moffitt 2016 and 2020). In that theoretical body, populism is analyzed as a socio-political discourse, style and perfor-

mance that seeks to challenge the status quo by mobilizing the people to identify as such and to follow a charismatic leader who speaks to and for them. These theorists examine populist rhetoric, style and performance and ask how these techniques co-construct populism: how do language and its uses create “the people,” the subject of populism?² For Kazin and those who follow a discursive-performative approach, populism is a combination of charismatic political performance and citizen participation. In this present moment, social media is a key site through which to witness this interplay of political style, how politicians create an insurgent following that defines itself as “the people,” and how citizens respond in ways that confirm their identity and communicate it to others.

Kazin’s second set of characterizations of populism refer specifically to the US. He points out two general characteristics: a moral revivalism and an enthusiastic defense of producers and makers, those whose blood and sweat power the nation, and provide it with sustenance, comfort and nobility (Kazin 3). Here, Kazin touches on the feeling of moral right that is expressed in discourse, affect, tone and expression. The second part — a valorization of makers and producers — is particularly interesting in this moment. As deindustrialization and mechanization crippled parts of the US economy and disproportionately affected workers without a college education, the pride and social position associated with being a maker — agrarian or industrial — is available to fewer individuals. However, the digital age has a political remedy for this — if not a vocational one. This solution is digital expression: making digital art that allows partisans to participate in the public square, through digital creation, or photographing and sharing images of homemade political art. These art practices follow the entrepreneurial logic of neoliberalism and the attention economy — free labor with the hope of remuneration.³ However, these practices also respond to a critical affective populist demand: to be seen, heard, recognized, and acknowledged as essential to the nation, and to have their labor understood as essential to the nation’s soul. Digital art may not feed or clothe anyone, but in a partisan environment where both sides interpret conflict as Manichean struggle, making and sharing political art is understood as essential to the very existence of the nation.

In his summary of populism in political theory, Moffitt points to the master narrative of “the people” versus elites as foundational in theories of populism – be it the predominately negative associations of the word in US and European populism or the positive associations in Latin America. Constructing a group called “the people” that is antagonistic to ruling elites is a constant, multi-front process whether done through civic, ethnic or racial definitions (Moffitt 2020). These processes of populist identity formation necessitate the deployment of cultural practices by both charismatic leaders and partisans. As Turner points out, in frontier days these activities emphasized collective, shared practices, ranging from pot luck dinners and square dances to prayer groups and knitting circles (Turner). These vernacular DIY forms of sociability were adapted to mass media, particularly with radio and newsletters (both of which featured letters from listeners/readers before call-ins were possible), and have moved onto social and digital media in the past two decades. Through all of these different communication media, the goal of creating “the people” and reinforcing the maker’s identity are a constant.

Much of the populist art of the Trump era falls into a broad umbrella category that itself has varied political implications: DIY, or “Do it Yourself.” DIY in the post-Industrial world serves as a counternarrative to industrialization, and has strong connections to some of the articulations of populism that have risen and fallen in the US since the end of the Civil War. Doing it yourself, making everything from clothing to houses and music, was a necessity for the homesteaders who rushed to leave the Eastern states for an opportunity to colonize in the Great Plains and the West. During the post-Civil War period, when populist agitation was rising in agrarian states, DIY went from being a necessity for those who lacked access or income to buy machine-made goods to being a badge of honor and a political act. DIY symbolized a rejection of elite culture and an identity of self-sufficiency, connection to the land, being a maker rather than a taker, and, most importantly, being one of *the people*, who literally made the nation.

Modern digital culture and social media render art making and exchange easier than it has ever been, with every photograph, song, vlog, meme or video a few clicks away from being broadcast globally. In the context of the US, partisan artisans freely share their art with digital followers, friends and strangers in exchange for likes, re-shares, comments, follows and other

forms of engagement.⁴ The proliferation of political prosumer⁵ products raises questions that relate to America's contemporary populist impulse, democracy in the digital age, and the political impacts of digitally enabled peer-to-peer connections. Analysis of this art leads to a complicated discussion on the intersections of art, populism, and new media, and the role of DIY art-making in the construction of new political identities and the aesthetics of populism. By giving these expressions attention, we better understand how partisanship evolves, spreads, is developed and expressed.

2020

Following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derrick Chauvin on May 25, 2020, protests erupted all over the US. Portland, Oregon was home to particularly hostile and sustained confrontations between protesters and law enforcement. The protests were exacerbated by the actions of poorly managed Federal troops, then-president Trump's inflammatory anti-protester rhetoric, videos of protesters breaking shop windows and law enforcement tear gassing and beating protesters. On September 5th, after over 100 straight days of protests and clashes between protesters and police, videographers captured footage of a protester inadvertently lighting his feet on fire as he set off a Molotov cocktail in front of the riot police line. In a state of panic and distress, the man runs awkwardly toward fellow protesters, feet blazing, caught between escaping the flames and attempting to shake the fire from his feet. A group of protesters eventually surround him and smother the fire with help from a riot police officer's fire extinguisher. Footage of the occurrence went viral and was covered by global media and gossip sites.⁶

On September 6th, Dan Scavino, an official in the White House Communications office and director of social media, tweeted an edited 30-second copy of the video clip accompanied by the anthemic chorus from Kenny Loggins' 1984 hit "Footloose," the Grammy-winning theme song from the eponymous movie. The music video offered no commentary or caption, just the video of the protester with the new soundtrack (without footage of the fire eventually being extinguished).⁷ Scavino's post was re-tweeted by Donald Trump with the headline, "These are the Democrats [sic] 'Peaceful Protests.' Sick!" and

was viewed more than three and a half million times before the account was suspended following the events of January 6, 2021 (a partial version is also available on the website of the British newspaper, *The Daily Mirror*).⁸ Following Scavino's viral tweet, a host of other pro-Trump tweeters uploaded the same video clip set to different music. Most of the videos have since been removed and several accounts have been suspended.

The short music video, generated by a staffer in the White House press office, re-Tweeted by the president and imitated by his supporters, is an example of what Wanless and Berk term "participatory propaganda." In their formulation, traditional top-down models for understanding propaganda are not suited for the digital age. In digital culture, Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), like Facebook and Twitter, facilitate digital peer-to-peer sharing of information. This form of information exchange (not necessarily fact sharing) allows for the targets of propaganda, selected through the data mining that social media enables, to become originators who then perpetuate the spread of information, sometimes with variations or additional commentary. Social media users actively engage in disseminating micro-targeted messages, amplifying the effect that a piece of propaganda can have, particularly if those who receive it share it with like-minded others, passing the message through multiple messengers. Information from a trusted source, like a friend or a fellow traveler, is powerful and has a veneer of truth or believability. This is affectively powerful when trust in institutions, like traditional media and government, is eroding (Wanless and Berk). I believe that it is small variations in information, like adding snarky comments, emojis, memes, or music, that reinforce partisan messages by personalizing the information, giving the sender a sense of ownership and investment in the message, and providing the receiver with cognitive cues to help them interpret the information.⁹

The act of creating and disseminating participatory propaganda is also a form of meta-propaganda, cultivating a stance towards information rather than providing concrete discourse. Rather than employing language to opine on the actions of protesters, Scavino's video uses artistic juxtaposition, humor and irony, and produces an interpretative stance that can be applied to future reporting on BLM, protests, or news from US cities, or rhetoric from Trump. The video produces an interpretation of an event that is par-

tisan, ahistorical and stripped of context. By utilizing music in an editorial capacity, the Tweet performs two critical actions. First, it makes an original viral video that is connected to a political flashpoint, re-framing this moment in ways that connect with Trump's messaging. In this case, the Movement for Black Lives had become a major dividing point in American politics, one that elicited strong emotional responses. By taking the video and combining it with a loveable, classic pop tune, it affectively frames the incident in Portland as laughable, and capable of shouldering Trump's political spin as a law-and-order president who can quell violent, but ultimately ridiculous, protests (in Democratic cities).

Second, as participatory propaganda, the video provides a road map for participation. Scavino's creative process is simple. A moderately savvy computer or smartphone user can take his Tweet, download the video and replace the sound with personal commentary or another song that puts a different spin on the incident. By adding new music and creating a sharable music video, the next maker appends another subjective layer of rhetoric that can be augmented further by captions, emojis or hashtags, always with the hope of going viral. These symbolic layers – video, sound, caption, hashtag – form equivalent links that inject meaning into quotidian experiences and gestures. Through making and sharing music videos, users co-construct and exchange their own interpretations of politics, in a dialogical process. This gives makers a sense of political investment and participation, creating pathways through which to receive, process and disseminate propaganda.

DIY music videos

As a form, the music video has had several different lives. First, as an outgrowth of the film industry, with movies like *Yellow Submarine*, *Woodstock*, *Gimmie Shelter* and *The Wall* exemplifying the intersections of animation, fiction, creative non-fiction, documentary and music. A second phase began with MTV, VH1 and other television channels dedicated to showing music videos, with record companies providing content by investing in music video production as a means of advertising their artists' singles and images. Finally, the digital sphere has added another dimension to music videos. In this iteration, artists and record labels make conventional music videos for digital

distribution, but these videos exist alongside numerous other videos that use the same song. Well before 2020, sites like YouTube were awash with user-made amateur videos. These included bedroom cover songs and lip-synchs, re-made videos using original and found footage, lyric videos, dance videos, and mash-ups.

This DIY digital engagement with music videos has become a common part of youth culture, facilitated by inexpensive, user-friendly software. The importance of DIY music video making is two-fold. First, familiarity makes the practice a common form of expression. These new expressions also accompany new practices of consumption that evolve to create dynamic modes of expectation and codes of meaning that are attached to the diverse aesthetics of DIY video. Even in the realm of professional music videos, several artists have used smartphones to shoot their videos (Chan) or used footage from hand-held cameras or found footage for effect, a rejection of film-derivative aesthetics of earlier music videos and an embrace of an amateur DIY aesthetic (McGillicuddy). Second, YouTube and other video repositories produce a form of digital archiving and canonization that occurs when users digitize old music videos and re-posted them, creating a user-generated, vernacular repository (Railton and Watson). These digital archives create their own discourses that form webs of signification through algorithms, user connections and comment sections. A search for one particular video offers exposure to videos that are similar in some way, augmented by YouTube and TikTok's autoplay feature. Travels into these pathways of algorithmic similitude create a receptive mindset, and craft an observer's sense of normalcy, expectation and connection. When this sense includes the notion of active participation – like making art in response to political events – pathways to meta-propaganda open up through active forms of engagement that encourage creative response.

Scavino's simple, short music video acts as a blueprint for becoming a political content creator and influencer. The video combines the creative potential of memes – image and text – with a third expressive layer of music, employing several affective modes to create meaning. In addition, music video making, like making memes, yard signs or posters, is a form of political participation that aids in community, identity, and ideological formations through both self-making and sharing. It is also relatively inexpensive to par-

ticipate in (after investment in a computer or phone). This low barrier to entry is significant in coding digital art as a popular, rather than elite, art form, a key component of populism. In this moment digital art is the art of the people, in spite of the obvious contradiction that digital culture is produced and runs on platforms controlled by multinational corporations. However, this fact also lends an insurgent quality to media making. It offers the veneer of guerrilla warfare – resisting from within and using elite tools against elites. In this case, using Silicon Valley for populist ends.

Burning feet set to Kenny Loggins

In political advertising, music is often the rhetoric. Images common to political ads are frequently generic symbols that can be interpreted in multiple ways. They are empty signifiers, always already primed to be filled with meaning. The addition of familiar music and recognizable cues is key to creating a stable interpretation (Christiansen). In the case of Scavino’s music video, the obvious interpretation is *Schadenfreude*: a conservative deriving glee from a BLM protester burning himself in the act of violent, unlawful disobedience. More elaborately stated: a Trump supporter relishing the self-inflicted pain of an uninformed, anti-law enforcement Democrat with no regard for private property in the process of breaking the law.

So how does the use of “Footloose” form the rhetoric of Scavino’s tweet, and what does this say about the relationships between music, image, and politics? For starters, “Footloose” the song is an excellent time capsule. Everything from the gated drum sounds and hand claps, synth and organ pads, and twangy lounge guitar, combined with the predictable chromatic buildup to an anthemic chorus are emblematic of 1980s yacht rock (see videos for Kenny Loggins “Playing with the Boys,” Huey Lewis and the News “Heart and Soul” or Hall and Oates’ “You Make My Dreams Come True” for examples). For Scavino’s purposes, the song is also borderline buffoonish: the lyrics are trite and Kenny Loggins’s call to the dance floor sounds contrived and corny. “Please, Louise/Pull me up off my knees/Jack, Get Back/c’mon before we crack” smacks of ersatz wholesomeness. However, the infectious chorus and back beat are still catchy. This helps explain why “Footloose” as a pop song is present enough in the popular imagination that it can

become rhetorically effective in a contemporary political context decades after its release. On a purely technical level, the actions of Scavino's video were matched to the tempo of the song, and the lyrics, about dancing and freedom, help to effectively re-code the action in the video. The skillful pairing of these two pieces of media — a recent news video from a protest that brings together several other hot-button issues and conservative talking points and a smash hit from 1984 — are meant to frame the flaming protester's wild gyrations as comical. This interpretation came through with clarity: responses to Scavino's tweet leave no doubt that his partisan message of derision and schadenfreude were received as intended.

What makes Scavino's video stand out, especially when compared to those who imitated him, is that Scavino was able to take a song that is vaguely present in popular culture and successfully re-signify it to reinforce Trump's populist message. The eponymous movie, a blockbuster released in the same year as the song, was about conflicts between urban and rural, secular and religious, future and past, freedom and repression, youth and adults. While the movie has a typical glossy Hollywood ending, it is one that emphasizes compromise. In a small town held in check by the grief-stricken conservative pastor, the youth and adults strike a balance between dancing and piety, freedom and conformity (Ross). "Footloose" the song matches the middle-of-the-road message of the movie — it is rock-adjacent, but clean, inoffensive and family-friendly. It emphasizes dancing but not sex, alcohol, or other hedonistic practices associated with rock and urban life. This history is not only hidden in Scavino's video, but the violently partisan message of the video is contradictory to the conciliatory message of the movie. This act of cultural appropriation and resignification is as important to the political message as it is to the aesthetic practice. It demonstrates the maker's power to dominate existing cultural products and re-make their meanings. The affect of Scavino's video is clear, and his imitators' videos used the similar affects — humor, derision, irony — in their videos. Examples include adaptations of Boots Randolph's instrumental "Yackety Sax" (1963), best known as the theme from the British comedy *The Benny Hill Show* (1955-1989), Usher's R&B ballad "Burn" (2010), Katrina and the Waves' catchy pop hit "Walking on Sunshine" (1983), and Billy Joel's novelty pop hit "We Didn't Start the Fire" (1989).¹⁰

There are three things that Scavinio's tweet demonstrates. First is the complicated relationship between expression and meaning, particularly in the overdetermined realm of political advocacy, where audiences are increasingly politically homogeneous and criticism and nuance take a backseat to reinforcing partisanship. This is especially true of Twitter and similar platforms where users choose who and which users and hashtags they follow and there is limited space for discourse. The second is that there is an art to effective media making. Just as with memes, logos, slogans, and other campaign materials, even pairings of pre-existing media – music and video – necessitate aesthetic intuition. Even if there is not a universal or consistent aesthetic, there are through lines that are not necessarily material or formal. The aesthetics of the DIY digital realm are constantly emerging and evolving. Finally, there is a tenuous relationship between popular music and other media – film, fashion, and genre for example – that are initially coterminous. The overblown style of yacht rock helps to make Scavino's video more comical, but associations with the eponymous film are nevertheless present if masked. More than simply being overwritten, the relationship between the message of the film and the pugilistic partisanship of the music video are contradictory. Yet the video itself was effective partisanship and participatory propaganda, completely erasing the issues and solutions encoded in the film, which are as relevant to American society now as they were in 1984.

This raises a troubling issue about the intersection of art and populism. This is the question of appropriation and the use of found materials, some of which are legally protected, for uses that may not have been intended by the artist and are possibly antithetical to their wishes. As opposed to forms of DIY making in earlier articulations of American populism, where DIY was about dignity and self-sufficiency, this example of video-making, along with other digital arts, like memes or vlogs, expresses two forms of domination: Populist partisanship that embodies populism's most demagogic tendencies¹¹ and the denial of the creators' agency. This expression of domination, particularly knowing, unapologetic appropriation, is an integral part of Trump's brand of populism, one that willingly flaunts law, regulation, precedent, morality and the will of artists.

Trump, Jesus and John Wayne

In May of 2020, religion scholar Kristen Du Mez published *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. The text confronts the contradictions in Evangelical Christianity's political articulations and the price that is paid in political degradation and by vulnerable populations who are the demonized subjects of patriarchal rhetoric and policies. The book was such a sensation that within a month of its release it was a featured book review in *The Boston Globe*. To accompany the review, the *Globe* commissioned a drawing from artist Joey Macalle. The color drawing was featured prominently, occupying more than half of the page. The image is rendered in a style that is realistic, making the three figures instantly recognizable, but with a hint of humor. It features a smiling, square-jawed "White Jesus" in the right foreground, wearing a white tunic with a US flag sash. In one hand he holds a shepherd's crook, in the other a small globe with a crack in the middle that bifurcates North America down the middle. Set back in the center is a scowling Trump, hugging a US flag, as he often did to the hanging flags that adorned stages where he spoke. Set even further back is John Wayne in his signature cowboy gear, pointing a revolver that is shooting out a small US flag, like a novelty toy gun. Finally, the White House is in the background on the far left.

Within a few months, Joey Macalle's image was taken from the *Boston Globe* and used, without alteration, as a Trump souvenir, made into prints and posters. The two sellers who, as of the writing of this article, are still selling the image, sell both prints and "autograph" copies, which contain an unauthenticated Trump signature. Both sellers, who go by the handles sand_dyke and jc333photos, have Ebay inventories that feature Trump memorabilia. Ebay user sand-dyke's inventory features Trump, Ronald Reagan and John Wayne, alongside classic rock bands like The Who and Led Zeppelin, other masculine idols like Clint Eastwood, Al Capone, Tom Selleck and Steve McQueen, and pinups from Marilyn Monroe and Yvonne De Carlo to Alexis Texas, Barbara Eden, Taylor Swift,¹² and former First Lady Melania Trump. In contrast, jc333photos sells only Christian-themed images, from framed Ten Commandments and romanticized scenes from the New Testament, to

images featuring a Black Jesus. There are also a healthy number of Christian Trump-themed prints available, like Trump and Jesus together, including Joey Macalle's image from the *Boston Globe*.

Like the example of Scavino's tweet, which de-contextualized two pieces of information and edited them together, this particular image is decontextualized and edited. Jesus' comical grin and Trump's scowl are not altered, and the childish flag emerging from John Wayne's gun is not edited out. The only alteration is the editor's title: "Men of God: Grappling with masculinity and Christianity in the age of Trump." Rather than adding to the product, as Scavino did, a simple extraction, easily done with photoshopping software, changed this image from mockery to a piece of partisan household kitsch. In this case, the amount of effort needed to effectively re-frame Macalle's work was minimal and the reception good enough that it is among top sellers for jc333photos.

While much simpler in its execution, the extracted and edited prints are a radical re-signifying of Macalle's image, and the intentions of reviewer Chrissy Stroop, who not only gave a positive review of Du Mez's work, but highlighted its necessity in public discourse as the country grapples with political crises and crises of faith. In a conversation with the artist, Macalle waved off his frustration of the appropriation of the image. Channeling his compassionate self, he wished the sellers well, stating that they likely needed the money more than he did. He also relayed the story of an unnamed fellow artist, who pursued a Trump supporter over an appropriated photograph only to find himself confronting a man who was down on his luck, using an old household printer to try to scratch out a few dollars from fellow Trump fans. The artist came away both hundreds of dollars lighter from hiring a lawyer only to find a man who was incapable of paying him anything, and feeling genuine compassion for that individual. As frustrating as it is seeing his work both taken and applied to a cause that he finds repulsive, Macalle also sees fighting this kind of appropriation as a losing game of whack-a-mole, impossible to win in the digital age.¹³

Appropriation and Populist Aesthetics

The political power embedded in song, image, or any other piece of art, should not be underestimated. However, power is not inherent but lies in use or application, in how effectively partisans re-signify art. “Dixie” and “Solidarity Forever” may seem quaint historical timepieces, but lives were lost and blood shed to their verses. In the past few years, “The Star Spangled Banner” has cost careers and ironically become a rallying cry for anti-critical race theory agitation and white nationalism (Nashrulia). These songs also share similar histories as adaptations of pre-existing material. “Solidarity Forever” and “The Star Spangled Banner” are contrafacta, new texts set to existing melodies. These lyrical changes successfully re-signified the songs. “Dixie” began its life as a blackface minstrel song by Dan Emmett, “The Star Spangled Banner” as the drinking song “To Anacreon in Heaven,” and “Solidarity Forever” as “John Brown’s Body” or “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” In all three cases, creativity in a moment of popular upheaval (the American Revolution and Civil Wars, and violent labor struggles in the early 20th century, respectively) led to a variation that effectively re-signified the song through popularity and use.

What these three examples, along with Scavino’s tweet and Macalle’s drawing, show is that a shortcut to harnessing the affective power of art is using pre-existing materials, rather than creating anew.¹⁴ Partisans, who are not homogeneous, can hear or see themselves and their ideals, and those of their enemies, in popular culture products. Modern digital culture takes this one step further, by moving listeners from “hearing” or “seeing” themselves represented by a cultural proxy to appropriating iconic art and re-working it to suit their own political and personal purposes. Partisans can now craft their identities through appropriating and re-making popular culture.

Cultural appropriation is always an index of asymmetrical power relationships (Ziff and Rao). To decode and assess these dynamics, Ziff and Rao outline four general concerns in analyzing the power relationships within cultural appropriation: concern for integrity and identity of cultural groups; impact on the appropriated object; benefit of some to the detriment of others; and failure of the law to recognize different forms of property and own-

ership. The first three are pertinent to this discussion. The role of the law with regard to political campaigns is compelling, but beyond the scope of this article.

Concern over the integrity and identity of cultural groups is shot through with power: who determines the boundaries of a “group” and its cultural, physical, or historical boundaries? Which communities produce products that should not be used by others? How are these differences managed within a larger polity? As Clifford argues, “self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than essence” (Clifford 14) In addressing the abandonment of class identity in post-industrial America, Bell theorizes that, “what unites them and divides them is not determined by their occupational position but more often may be related to religion, cultural interests, family upbringing, and the like” (Bell lxvi). In a similar vein, Erlmann states,

Aesthetics become the ethics of modern human existence, in which subjects and communities model themselves on an epistemology of *Erscheinung* rather than *Wesen*, on a play of forms instead of the actualization of some existential truth. The desire for community, then, for the aesthetic foundation of human existence, has to do with more than the so called postmodern infatuation with design and surfaces. It is the hallmark of a world without synthesis, of an age of contingency and ambiguity, and of societies without the security of tradition, but also without the claims to universal truth of former eras. In short, aesthetic communities are all those social formations – the loose affiliations, groupings, neo-tribes, and cult groups of free-floating individuals – that are not anchored in rigid structures of control, habitus and filiation. (Erlmann 12)

Synthesizing these views, identity in modern society is flexible, rather than pre-determined, is shot through with binary power-relations, and is organized by aesthetic play rather than existential truths. The process of self-determining is also one that is other-determining. While some others will nearly always be precluded from full participation in modern America, individuals have more freedom of association, and these complex modern modes of association are enacted in the use of popular culture, putting aesthetics front and center in political identity formation and struggle.

In modern America, where class and identity can be opaque, and digital identity is increasingly important (Turkle), what constructs a populist identity, and how does that identity manifest in power relationships? Here, a return to Kazin’s definitions is informative. First, populism as a language. Second, ordinary people (makers) who are fighting against illegitimate ruling

elites, with only morality and the ideals of democracy on their side. People can learn a new language, be transformed by it and enter into new language communities. New speakers can also participate in the evolution of that language, injecting new terminologies and rhetoric. Populism is a practice of filling empty signifiers, both in language and images. In the digital world, this language contains memes, vlogs and music videos. Learning to communicate in populist modes, like a language, is most effective when one can not only comprehend and imitate, but also be creative and expressive. While Kazin's second characteristic, moral revivalism, is a less dominant characteristic in Trump-style populism, the Manichean overtones of its rhetoric point to a moralizing impulse, even when the moral compass is jittery. Finally, the identity as "producers" is vital to populism, but precarious because production in the uneven post-industrial economy is often non-material, in forms like algorithms and procedural knowledge. Given that Trump's main pre-presidential occupations were as reality TV host and popular Tweeter, occupying a Trump-style populist identity – recognizing populist symbols and speaking back to them, occupying a position as a "maker," and imitating Trump's populist style – lends itself to digital making. By producing and exchanging digital art, populists are both speaking the anti-establishment language of populism and fulfilling a historical role as makers. This dialogic action is part of the performance of populism through which "the people" are constituted and constitute themselves. This "maker" role is made more salient by the often unrealized possibility of being remunerated through digital content production.

In Trump-era populism, making videos (music or otherwise), images, memes, podcasts, and other digital practices are a constitutive element of populist communities. Many of these practices depend on appropriation of music, images, and texts that re-signify their meanings. Part of the contemporary populist aesthetic is not just appropriation, but a level of appropriation that performs radical re-signification, knowingly separating an object from its contextual or historical meaning and ventriloquizing it in a way that both serves political purposes and exhibits power over the object itself. Exhibiting power and domination through appropriation is part of the aesthetic practices of Trumpism.

This leads to the question of the impact upon the object. There are times in the past when partisan use of a song led to it being completely re-signified, like the examples cited above (also see Gonyea, 2018). It can be argued that Stevie Wonder's "Signed, Sealed, Delivered" will be perpetually linked to Obama, Rachel Platten's "Fight Song" to Hillary Clinton, and Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop" with Bill Clinton. But these three songs were used by permission. The first Trump campaign is associated with Twisted Sister's "We're not Gonna Take it," (although permission was later revoked), but the campaign is better known for its confrontational approach towards artists. Numerous artists – REM, Adele, Aerosmith, The Rolling Stones – asked the campaign to stop using their music, which the campaign publicly rejected. A legal battle with Neil Young ended with a Trump campaign victory, lending cache to this pugilistic form of appropriation (Beaumont-Thomas). While the re-signification of the song was not completed, the exertion of power over its maker reinforced Trump's populist brand of domination.

The question of cultural group and impact lead to a prime concern: who benefits? One can argue that Lee Greenwood has benefited from the association of "God Bless the USA" with Republican politics, even if it was not his intention. Bruce Springsteen may not have liked the 1984 Republican National Convention using "Born in the USA," (see Schoening and Kasper, chapter 5) but it has not damaged his standing with either progressive or conservative audiences. This points to Ziff and Rao's "borrowed" terminology – that the affective and expressive power of music is indeed borrowed and that only in rare circumstances does political association fully re-signify popular music to the extent that association excludes it from other uses. But the analysis does point to power relationships and existing laws. In the case of the Trump campaign, REM, Neil Young, Adele and The Rolling Stones all unsuccessfully sued to stop the campaign from using their music at live events. All four were unsuccessful because the Trump campaign paid the blanket licensing fee (Beaumont-Thomas).

It is here that we see the underlying power relationships play out. The Trump campaign had the financial resources to confront popular artists' cease and desist demands, although artists are finding ways to contest these uses (Hogan). The campaign also gained cultural capital by publicly rejecting these demands and proving that they are impervious public shaming (labeled

as “woke” or “politically correct”). For less prominent media makers, having the resources to make tribute videos and post them is nearly risk free, and imitating Trump’s style has benefits. Even in the rare case of cease and desist order, there are potential gains. First, if the maker went viral, they may have attracted new followers and a larger audience. Second, having to remove content can be a badge of honor, proof of being one of the people who is oppressed by an illegitimate ruling elite. Finally, social media platforms’ algorithms encourage users to constantly update their content, rendering older content less meaningful.¹⁵ In other words, there is low risk associated with cultural appropriation for peer-to-peer sharing, and those who use this low-risk tactic can appropriate the cultural products of others to amass social capital in the form of followers and re-posts, with the benefit of participating in populist language and praxis. In contemporary populism, it is those who possess resources, access, and ability to “re-make,” re-signify and dominate the other, who are positioned for gain, rather than those who originally produced (Bell). Contemporary populist aesthetic practices use the aesthetic labor of others as the raw material for the formation of populist language and participatory meta-propaganda.

In addition, aesthetic practices that involve appropriating music despite an artists’ wishes or ignoring the original artistic context become politically relevant. The performance of knowing art well enough to utilize or monetize its affect, having the power to bend the work of art to one’s will, and to produce a meaningful cultural product for one’s own purposes without consent or permission is the performance of power. In an attention economy, having the ability to use another’s labor to garner attention is an exercise of power. By using a borrowed artifact, appropriation becomes an aesthetic quality, the outward manifestation of underlying structures. In post-industrial and attention economy structures, where being seen is cultural or actual capital (Goldhaber), power and productivity rests on the ability to re-make, re-imagine, or re-narrate (Bell lxiv). These mesh perfectly with familiar populist demands for recognition, validation, and voice. Cultural appropriation is a shortcut to populist cultural capital and one of its key aesthetics.

If aesthetic practices are a model of subjectivity against domination, “a vision of human energies as radical ends in themselves which is the implacable enemy of all dominative or instrumentalist thought” (Eagleton 9) if they are

objects that demonstrate freedom and imagination, the logic of the free heart and mind, or that which points us to a world that has not yet been created (Marcuse), modern populism points to a dark horizon. Contemporary populist aesthetics show us a desire for domination and control, with no guiding principles other than a performance of power and domination. What they dominate is another ethics of inclusion, compassion and radical equality. In contemporary US populism, power, influence and domination, even if momentary, have become the dominant aesthetic. The underlying disregard for the art of other makers, and the desire to appropriate their work, not for its beauty but for its potential to go viral and accumulate social capital, to use it as a backdrop for the construction of personal political identity and inclusion at the expense of the exclusion of others, illustrates contemporary populism's inhumane, callous, and violent tendencies.

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Notes

1. There are many simultaneous articulations of populism, both historical and contemporary. For this essay, populism is short hand for Trump-style conservative populism.
2. Laclau and Mouffe's work is the root for this approach. Also see Moffitt, 2016 and 2020.
3. For a good early theory of the attention economy, see Goldhaber; for an excellent recent theory with regard to social media, see Zulli. Literature on neoliberalism is large and growing. See Wendy Brown and David Harvey for excellent overviews.
4. See Zulli for a critical perspective on the attention economy of the glance on Instagram.
5. Ott and Mack's definition of prosumer, a conflation of "producer" and "consumer," implies that the maker is amateur who exists within multi-national global circulation and monetization. The lines between remunerated amateur and professional media maker are blurry.
6. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/black-lives-matter-portland-protester-accidentally-sets-himself->

on-fire/ZZR6HIEYCWEHNFXVY5KP3XMGQ/

<https://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/world/watch-portland-protester-accidentally-sets-himself-on-fire/video/e9194c76f0b15adf3f636b953381f2fc>

<https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2020/09/07/2343709/portland-protester-accidentally-sets-himself-on-fire-video>

<https://www.tmz.com/2020/09/06/man-catches-on-fire-at-portland-protest-molotov-cocktail/>

7. <https://twitter.com/DanScavino/status/130249194017444865>

8. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/us-news/portland-activist-sets-himself-alight-22639741>

9. Daniel Bell describes the process of creating knowledge in post-industrial culture as one of re-arranging information into narrative (lxv-lxiv). Wanless and Berk's formulation elides with Bell's in that by taking bits of information and fitting them together into a coherent and easily decoded narrative, partisan art makers collectively create a kind of "knowledge."

10. All three pop songs were top-10 hits in the US, with both "Burn" and "We Didn't Start the Fire" peaking at no. 1.

11. The links between populism and demagoguery, violent xenophobia and racism are well documented. See Woodward, Hofstadter, Judis, Eatwell and Rummins for examples. However, these links as automatic or monolithic are contested by scholars like Laclau and Kuzminski who reject this automatic association and view the voice of the people embodied in populism as a necessity for true democracy and the representation of the unrepresentable other as a necessity for true democracy.

12. Taylor Swift is not known as a pin-up, but these particular prints are made for the male gaze.

13. Personal Communication, July, 2023.

14. This tendency can be located as early as the 1932 Roosevelt campaign, but was solidified in 1984. See Schoening and Kasper, Ch. 6.

15. See Zulli for a theory of the glaze as a principle of social media engagement.

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