FROM THE CENTRE TO THE BACKGROUND:

**THE POPULIST PERFORMANCE AND AMBIENT MEDIA OF
EVO MORALES AND DONALD TRUMP**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a theoretical analysis of how the figure of the populist leader, often framed in terms of its spectacular performances, also works in the background to affect how "the people" of populism conceive of their subjecthood, belonging, and potential for political action. I transpose Ernesto Laclau's (2005) formulation of populism as a political logic onto individuals: populism, and especially the populist leader, not only coheres disparate social and political demands, but give the people the license to act upon their own contradictory desires and beliefs. The strength of these symbolic and affective victories rests upon constraint, as the populist leader becomes the middle term between the people and the source of sovereign power, demanding continual investment and setting bounds upon the terms of political action. Looking at Donald Trump's tweets and Evo Morales graffiti, I argue that any attempt to contend with these logics must account for the leaders' ambient mediations across time and space. It is not the spectacular events of populism but the ways in which they come to feel inseparable from our banal everyday, a sort of mediatic becoming ambient, that give populism its danger and its strength.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette mémoire analyse la façon dont la figure du leader populiste, souvent encadrée en termes de performances spectaculaires, fonctionne également en arrière-plan pour affecter la façon dont « le peuple » du populisme conçoit sa subjectivité, son appartenance et son potentiel d'action politique. Je transpose sur les individus la formulation du populisme comme logique politique d'Ernesto Laclau (2005) : le populisme, et en particulier le leader populiste, non seulement cohere des revendications sociales et politiques disparates, mais donne aux gens la possibilité d'agir selon ses propre désirs et croyances contradictoires. La force de ces victoires symboliques et affectives repose sur la contrainte, le leader populiste devenant l'intermédiaire entre le peuple et la source du pouvoir souverain, exigeant un investissement continu et bornant les modalités de l'action politique. En regardant les tweets de Donald Trump et les graffitis sur Evo Morales, je soutiens que toute tentative de lutter contre ces logiques doit rendre compte des médiations ambiantes des dirigeants à travers le temps et l'espace. Ce ne sont pas les événements spectaculaires du populisme mais la manière dont ils en viennent à se sentir inséparables de notre quotidien banal, une sorte de devenir ambiant médiatique, qui donne au populisme son danger et sa force.

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INTRODUCTION

The populist persona

In the fall of 2021, Tesla CEO Elon Musk and his partner, the musician Grimes, announced that they were calling it quits. Amid the typical jokes and celebrity gossip that followed, some Twitter users responded with memes featuring an unlikely figure: former Bolivian president Evo Morales. On the platform, the link between the two figures had been forged almost two years prior, in the midst of the November 2019 protests and coup that unseated Morales. The political turmoil was a hot topic among many prominent English-speaking, left-wing Twitter users, and a slew of tweets positing that the electric vehicle manufacturer and its contentious CEO played a role in the coup went viral. At the time, Tesla sourced the lithium for their car batteries from Australia, but Twitter users pointed to post-coup gains in Tesla's stock price to argue they had a material, demonstrable stake in a fully privatized lithium market in Bolivia. Interest died down as time went on, but some two years later, Twitter users would respond to Musk's breakup by invoking the figure of a victorious Morales. They were giving Evo the last laugh.

Evo Morales has become, for a certain type of online leftist, an icon of resistance: thwarted, out of power, but ultimately vindicated. His victories are not political; such politics are outside the realm of the accessible for most western Twitter users. Nevertheless, the figure of Morales performs symbolic and affective work. In the retweeted image on the left (below), he embodies a simple, child-like jubilance, pure in his victory over interim president Jeanine Áñez but even more so over Musk. On the right, with his head photoshopped onto Musk's body beside Grimes on the red carpet, he has confidence and just the hint of a smile. If our first tweet lays out

the pieces in the chronology of his success, walking the reader through them, the second

condenses them into one. These tweets operate on a familiar logic, soliciting and rewarding those

in on the joke. Yet they do more: they let you share in Evo's victories, so long as you develop

some affective bond with him as an icon.

On the left is a four-image tweet that establishes Musk and interim President Jeanine Áñez as Evo's
adversaries, and then juxtaposes Áñez's arrest and Musk's breakup with a smiling Morales. On the right
is a text-and-image tweet, in which an edited photo is used to bolster the joke that "Grimes [has left] Elon
Musk for former Bolivian President Evo Morales." Both posts received tens of thousands of likes.

Even in these tweets, which cast Evo as a minor character in a larger fight, we can see

him as more than just a cross-cultural trickster to be evoked but ultimately discarded. Nor is the

reason why these images were emotionally resonant and symbolically meaningful outside of

Bolivia reducible to mere political charisma or discursive relevance. As a populist leader, Evo is

a "performing icon," which Angela Marino (2018) uses to mean an iconic figure that is not

merely a "cult object" but "a living body that continues to perform its own imaginaries" (p. 137).

In this thesis, I make the case that the processes that constitute and sustain a populist leader like

Morales create this kind of icon: one open-ended enough for us to invest any number of

meanings and emotions in, yet coherent as the persona is subject to repeated mediation and movement. The biggest, brashest example today is in the Trump-inspired MAGA (Make America Great Again) merchandise that has saturated popular culture, coming to hold great personal meaning and effect a global sense of political community.

More precisely, I mean that a successful populist leader effects a kind of persona that can become both the object and the ground of political action and desire. This persona must retain coherence despite the many, even contradictory uses to which it is put. Perhaps counterintuitively, this lends the populist a much stronger form than that of the liberal-democratic politician, who though he pretends integrity is burdened with representing the opinions and attitudes of his chosen electorate, leaving crumbs of political promise to satiate each partial constituency. By strength here I am not referring to an ability to pass legislation or influence policy. I am interested in how the persona of the populist leader is used by others as the referent, justification, or prohibition for political action itself. The relationship between the stickiness of the populist persona in conditioning action within its own political context (e.g., the opening of what people felt to be true or possible of the United States under Trump), and its affinity with larger media logics premised on speed, movement, and virality (such that MAGA and Trump became iconic and always relevant), is explored in the pages that follow. I argue that the affective and symbolic importance of Donald Trump, for instance, and its accompanying mediatic movement and atmospheric hold, are not unique to him but are reproduced to varying degrees with other populist leaders, operating within a variety of media systems. I look at what allows the populist leader to function as a ready-made media figure, even as the media differ.

To say that a Trump-like figure, a spectacular leader claiming to act for the people, would have an advantage in the politics of image and affect is par for the course (e.g., Kellner, 2016).

Many would even agree upon the underlying reasons: as Wendy Brown et al. (2018) and others compellingly argue, the neoliberal attack on the social has weakened both public institutions and public life. This hollowing out of the public as such has left the leaders of liberal polities ill-equipped to address the concurrent threats of climate change, economic collapse, and even nuclear war. The conditions that produced such fundamental crises and the inability to confront them are the very same. No wonder, then, that political movements and leaders making inroads are the ones rejecting 'the system' of institutional politics as authoritarian and corrupt, only to adopt spectacularly authoritarian solutions of their own. It is much easier to enact a theatre of democracy than to achieve it; and when alternatives are difficult or alienating, symbolic victories are better than none at all.[1]

In the *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk (1987) writes that post-Enlightenment cynicism "has become a hard-boiled, shadowy cleverness that has split courage off from itself, holds anything positive to be a fraud, and is intent only on somehow getting through life" (p. 47). In such a barren political and intellectual landscape, he preaches the power of the *kynicism* of the Greek philosopher Diogenes. Unlike cynicism, kynicism works "to confront the pathetic phrases of the ruling official ideology — its solemn, grave tonality — with everyday banality and to hold them up to ridicule, thus exposing behind the sublime noblesse of the ideological phrases the egotistical interests, the violence, the brutal claims to power" (Žižek, 1989, p. 29). Sloterdijk's book is an uneasy foreshadowing of the Trump presidency. Most interesting for our purposes, however, is this everyday banality: what forms it takes and what it allows or prohibits people to do, to make, and to feel.

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[1] There are, of course, different explanations for populism's current resonance, with neoliberalism as a common factor provoking economic or class-based anxieties on the one hand (Betz, 1990) and social dislocation and cultural backlash on the other (Hochschild, 2016; Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Schönfelder, 2008). Some accounts, like Lawrence Grossberg's (2018) writing on Trump, take a less specific, more conjunctural view entirely.

Populist leaders like Evo Morales and Donald Trump are adept at this *kynical* inversion: the ability to turn the event into the everyday and the spectacular into the banal. By tapping into and excelling at this logic, a logic both incentivized and made possible by the structures of contemporary media, the populist persona operates at the level of performance — in the register of the spectacular event — but also extends into our surroundings and persists across time, such that these performances permeate our banal everyday lives. I am interested here in what Lauren Berlant (2011) names the "space of abeyance," of being held, that characterizes contemporary citizenship. Berlant argues that in many ways, citizenship has become ambient: something more felt than articulated, whose mandates are often not heard but rather overheard. I argue that we must look at this ambient register of populist politics, through the everyday and the banal, to understand the fullness of its power and constraint. We can read this not against the performances that make the leader iconic, but instead as a consequence of and scaffolding for these cohering events. What is happening in the background matters.

First, I explore the power found when one engages with what I am referring to as the spectacular event, a public performance in which the populist leader symbolically offers himself as the ground of political possibility and the source of political enjoyment. I turn to the legacy of Ronald Reagan to argue that Trump's power lay (and for many, still lies) in his embrace of the contradiction. Reagan juxtaposed sunny optimism with stormy economic waters, and implicitly, with his own cold disregard for the welfare of poor and marginalized Americans. Trump took up the Reaganite mantle of contradiction, but his was between his buffoonish persona and the suit-and-tie expectations of his office, between one thing he said and the next, and between the archetypes he swung between. This freed his politics wholesale from the limitations of consistency and allowed supporters to operate in the terrain of unreserved affect and action.

Crucially, however, as Trump's tweets moved across platforms, they were covered frantically by media outlets until they came to feel inescapable, always in the air. I argue that these two processes are intertwined, and equally important. Trump's ability to offer supporters short-term enjoyment cannot be separated from his function of providing a larger sense of safety in experiencing politics and place within the world.

The themes of subjectivation and identification are taken up in the next chapter, where I look at how mediations of Evo Morales become ambient. If the first chapter is about the possibilities of populism, the second chapter focuses on what is foreclosed when the formation of oneself as a subject and member of a political community is premised upon the leader. On the one hand, the (re)new(ed) Bolivian symbolism under Morales becomes a ground upon which citizens can imagine a variety of political possibilities: they can try to appropriate these figures for their own ends, manoeuvre within these regimes of signification to achieve their own goals, or attempt to unmake the prevailing associations to question Morales' authority and his project. On the other, the political graffiti about Morales shows a saturation through time and across space that invites a sense of being held by his persona. The sense of being held is a feature of both the atmospheric (Stewart, 2017) and the intimate (Berlant, 2011), with the result that the leader comes to feel both in the air and close at hand. This duality can influence how we conceive of our political subjecthood, community, and possibility, and ultimately undercut the supposed collectivizing power of the populist leader.

Despite the different media forms and media logics at work in these cases, I try to show the commonalities between them. In many ways, this is an account of how neoliberal forces have hollowed out truly public spaces, and the roles which media play in redirecting these would-be publics. The process I am describing, which renders the spectacular banal and the event

everyday, is inseparable from the rise in volume and in speed in contemporary mass media. The conditions were there, in other words, for the populist leader to lay claim to these energies and harness them — and I hope to show why this figure proved so adept at the task. At the same time, these two cases show the futility of drawing hard lines between the logics governing physical and digital, online and offline media. As I hope to show, the desires and limitations that various populist media produce may have a different colour, but the fundamentals stay recognizable across them.

Populism and "the people"

Populism has undergone waves of theorization since its early heyday in the 1950s and 1960s (Ionescu & Gellner 1969; Lipset, 1960; Shils, 1956) as its conceptual relevance has ebbed and flowed. As Marco Revelli (2019) argues, although populism long existed in the imperial core, it was long thought of in the context of the global periphery, especially Latin America and the USSR,[2] though the work of Margaret Canovan (1981, 1999) and Stuart Hall (1988) bucks the trend. A recent wave of political movements premised upon the creation of antagonistic binaries between the "people" of the nation and either economic or cultural elites has spurred on a new wave of theorizing around populism within the social sciences. Contemporary English-language debates have largely been divided in three camps: theorizations of populism as a thin-centred ideology (Mudde, 2007), communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt, 2016), and political strategy (Weyland, 2001).[3]

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[2] Revelli (2019) points to the slew of recent, largely historical writing about American populism that has sought to fill this gap in scholarship.

[3] As Revelli (2019) highlights, there is another important and theoretically robust 21st-century body of work on populism in Italy, due in part to the salience of this concept in describing political trends that hit Italy earlier than much of the Western world. E.g., Formenti, 2016; Grassi, 2016; Panizza, 2005.

Theorizations of populism as an ideology draw from sociologist Edward Shils' (1956) pioneering work, which used the American example to identify and generalize what would later be termed populism's "people centrism" and the belief in a direct link to government. Cas Mudde is a leading theorist of populism as an ideology within studies of neo-populism, or populism after the 1990s. Mudde (2007) writes that populism is "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (p. 23). Since populism exists in such varied forms, a thin-centred approach allows theorists like Mudde to assert populism's ideological content without limiting its co-expression with movements on the left and right of the political spectrum. While this remains a popular approach, others (e.g., Moffitt, 2016) have questioned the theoretical clarity and empirical validity of such a broad ideology.

Drawing on Margaret Canovan (1981), who argued that the rhetoric style used by populists is more of a common factor than any ideological markers, Jan Jagers and Stefaan Walgrave (2007) theorize populism as a communication style used by political actors to varying degrees. "Thin" populist leaders speak about "the people," whereas "thick" populist leaders also employ exclusionist and anti-establishment rhetoric. Benjamin Moffitt (2016) pushes for a further distinction between style and discourse, building on earlier work by Alan Knight (1998) to argue that performative actions from populist political actors go far beyond the words used; for instance, taking public transit, living humbly, dressing casually, and more are all hallmarks of performative authenticity from populist leaders. Yet this conceptualization also has its critics, who highlight the empirical challenges of such a broad-based definition. To give the concept a tighter focus, Kurt Weyland (2001) has characterized populism as a strategy whereby politicians

develop close ties with supporters to cement their status as popular, personalistic leaders. His is an approach "that focuses on the methods and instruments of winning and exercising power" (Ibid., p. 12), but in doing so, it prioritizes populist political actors over publics.

For all this talk of the importance of demarcating the "people," across these definitions there is a lack of interest in the actual people of populism, with the focus instead on theoretical commonalities, modes of discourse, and elite rationales. Placing the rationale for populism solely at the elite level downplays the importance of bottom-up engagements. This causes problems right at the outset, reliant as populism is on a construction of a "people" that lays claim to political legitimacy. Disallowing the individuals that make up this people any agency or motivation outside the frame of information consumer or voter posits that people engage with populist styles and tactics in prescribed ways, without much curiosity about why and how they do. Part of this is doubtless due to the methodological constraints that come with a people-centred approach, constraints this thesis bears the weight of as well. My response is to keep the figure of the populist leader central, but to ask in what ways this figure reaches people and in what ways they reach out to him, and to ask what this figure might mean to the people who choose to support him and what possibilities this investment opens up and forecloses.

For this project I am inspired in intent, though not in approach, by the recent move toward ethnographic accounts of populist publics, in particular, by Cleve Arguelles (2019) and Nicole Curato's (2016) work in the Philippines, which underscores the affective resonance of the narratives former president Rodrigo Duterte espoused. Curato (2016) argues that Duterte's populism relied on the "seemingly opposing, yet mutually reinforcing, logics of the politics of fear and the politics of hope" (p. 106). These she characterizes not as tools of mass manipulation but as discourses that put forth a certain, affectively potent vision of the political sphere and

offered choices based upon it. Arguelles (2019), similarly, finds that people's support was "about making their everyday misery visible, bringing authenticity to politics, and overcoming bureaucratic inertia" (p. 417). In both of these accounts, Duterte is something of an avatar, and earns legitimacy through his capacity to effect a kind of change that we might not characterize as democratic, but that many supporters would.

The significance of these identifications cannot be understated: as one supporter told Arguelles (2019), despite the highly mediated connection between them, "I like hearing Duterte speaks [sic]… it is almost like I am the one speaking" (qtd. on p. 428). Yet taking these accounts seriously does not mean ignoring their inconsistencies; in fact, what is crucial is that the contradiction inherent in this mediated closeness, or Duterte's authoritarian "democracy," does not provoke in supporters a feeling, let alone a crisis, of incoherence. As Bobby Benedicto (2021) makes clear in his writing on the body of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos, if the Philippines is in a period of "authoritarian nostalgia [that] demonstrates the precarity of the temporal progression from absolute to popular sovereignty, it is because the 'people' themselves appear to be willing its reversal, to be welcoming the return of one that would act in their stead and whose disappearance they once paradoxically celebrated" (p. 727).

While Benedicto places this figure as a kind of sovereign undead, returning through the symbolic sites of body and tomb, Angela Marino (2018), in her study on Chavismo in Venezuela, theorizes the populist leader as an outcome of a practice of populist performance at the street level. She argues that the practice of devil dances in Venezuela offered citizens a sphere to practice a kind of populist coming-together and symbolic antagonism. Chavez's populism, by her telling, did not take a passive people by storm, but built upon already-existing forms of public life. These are very different explanations, and in fact very different phenomena.

However, this is why I think it is helpful to turn to the theorization of populism that, though it operates at a high level of abstraction, nonetheless shows the rationale social groups have for participating in populist politics and investing in the figure of a populist leader, even across such difference.

The logic of populism

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe posit populism not merely as a strategy or style employed from the top down, but as an overarching logic structuring politics. For Laclau in particular, an agonistic construction of the people is at the heart of every political project — he calls it "the political operation *par excellence*" (Laclau, 2005, p. 153). To do this he distinguishes between two political logics: the logic of equivalence and the logic of difference. The differential logic is one in which political demands are treated as separate claims pertaining to the groups that make them, and this is the logic governing democratic polities. Yet when such differentiated demands are persistently unmet, groups begin to make their demands in concert, and the equivalential logic takes hold. From that point on, there is a division within the polity between those making the demands and those identified as the barriers to achieving them. The battle lines are drawn and redrawn as allegiances shift, until different popular demands have consolidated into a coalition that, however provisional, becomes more than the sum of its parts. Or, as Laclau puts it, "the consolidation of the equivalential chain through the construction of a popular identity which is something qualitatively more than the simple summation of the equivalential links" (Ibid., p. 77). With this we have the creation of the "people" of populism.

The presence of what Laclau calls the "empty signifier" allows for the creation of the unified totality: they are co-constitutive. Such signifiers are affective and over-determined discursive constructions, standing for many different and even contradictory demands. Laclau

writes that in general, "the more populist interpellations truly play the role of empty signifiers — the more they manage equivalentially to unify the community — the more they are also the object of a radical investment" (Ibid., p. 191). This differs from Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of the "floating signifier," which is similarly empty and able to hold together contradiction, but does not play this central cohering role. Floating signifiers can play important roles nonetheless, as Stuart Hall shows with Margaret Thatcher. He writes that Thatcher was adept at fostering radical investments in such signifiers for a broad sweep of politics he terms "authoritarian populism." Law and order took a definitive role, as did the "archetypal petty-bourgeois 'shopkeeper' figure" (Hall, 1988, p. 141). Thatcherism "constituted not a discourse, but a field of discourses in which the interpellations of the one summon up and condense a series of others" (Ibid., p. 144). Effectively, though, so did Thatcher herself.

This is the point where my analysis breaks off with that of Laclau's collaborator, Chantal Mouffe, who argues for a left populism "whose unity is secured by the identification with a radical democratic conception of citizenship and a common opposition to the oligarchy" (Mouffe, 2018, p. 80). This is an attractive formulation for a response to the wave of right-wing, authoritarian populisms sweeping the global political scene. Yet it underplays the importance that even Laclau places on the populist leader himself.[4] Laclau acknowledges that such a leader is well positioned for the kind of unifying role that populism demands: "The less a society is kept together by immanent differential mechanisms, the more it depends, for its coherence, on this transcendent, singular moment. But the extreme form of singularity is an individuality. In this way, almost imperceptibly, the equivalential logic leads to singularity, and singularity to

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[4] Throughout my thesis I refer to the populist leader using male pronouns. This is in part because my two examples are men, though prominent figures like Marine Le Pen and a growing body of research on female populists (e.g., Spierings et al., 2015) show that such a figure need not be male. However, I think it is important to highlight the comparative advantage men have in emptying themselves of symbolic content, compared to women, who are always already assigned the position of difference.

identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader." (Laclau, 2005, p. 100). In Laclau, the populist leader is at once an object of identification for the people themselves and for a host of separate demands. The leader can articulate these demands by standing above them, creating a logic that coheres them through the singularity of his person, providing both a ground for popular politics to occur and a persona for individuals to identify with.

There is no one populism, and not every populist movement possesses or needs a charismatic leader at its head. However, I think Laclau makes a good point, one that gets worryingly little consideration in Mouffe's (2018) more public-facing call to adopt a left populism. You can rally a diverse coalition around an expansive term like democracy, reinvesting it with meaning. Yet despite the outsized importance that concepts like freedom and democracy hold for people, who have proven willing to kill and die for them, they hold meaning only through our own history with them (see Long, 2016). Changing the nature of our investment in these concepts becomes a much simpler task with a charismatic leader at the helm.

In my estimation, it is valuable to transpose Laclau and Mouffe's account of the social demand onto the individual political subject. This move is to some degree in tension with Laclau's approach, which expressly calls into question "the notions of interests and self-determined wills" that form the base of, say, a social contract theory (Laclau, 2005b, p. 154). Laclau writes,

> The communitarian fullness that the social whole cannot provide cannot be transferred either to the individuals. Individuals are not coherent totalities but merely referential identities which have to be split up into a series of localised subject positions. And the articulation between these positions is a social and not an individual affair (the very notion of 'individual' does not make sense in our approach). (Ibid.)

In light of this turn away from the emphasis on individual political agency, why put Laclau's logic in these terms? In part because we can see something resembling populism in contexts where this language of social demands does not resemble how the vast majority of people are experiencing or engaging in politics. In most democracies, the kind of populist performances that Marino (2018) documents are few and far between, and even a coalitional politics rarely achieves the level of coherence that this definition of populism implies. Laclau's bone of contention lies with the idea of "agents whose identities are constituted around clear-cut interests" (Ibid.). I agree, but I think it is well worth understanding how subjects are formed and reformed when interests are murky and multivalent, and how the populist leader can hold together such contradiction beyond the level of the social demand.

The politics of ambience

Laclau's approach, while influential, has its fair share of detractors (see Hart, 2019). Many scholars hesitate to adopt this totalizing logic of populism not as just *a* but *the* fundamental logic of the political.[5] Benjamin Arditi (2007), for instance, takes issue with Laclau's position that, "If populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice at the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative" (Laclau qtd. in Arditi, 2017, p. 48). Arditi's response is to validate the first part — the role of populism as such a radical alternative — without accepting the second. Populism, rather than being synonymous with politics thus understood, "is a symptom of democratic politics; it grants visibility to the founding negativity of the political by summoning the disruptive 'noise' of the people" (Arditi, 2017, p. 78). But what is this popular noise? Is it the unheard voice of the masses? Is it akin to, as Arditi

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[5] This takes a greater role in his 2005 essay, "Populism: What's in a name?" than his book from the same year.

thinks, the commotion of "a guest who has had a drink too many… disrupt[ing] table manners and the tacit rules of sociability by speaking loudly, interrupting the conversations of others, and perhaps flirting with them beyond what passes for acceptable cheekiness" (Ibid., p. 78)? In contrast to this characterization of populism's "noise," I would offer a different account entirely; or rather, one that shares many of the same fundamentals, but with new conclusions. This demands we take seriously Laclau's claim about the expansive nature of populism, and its potential to encompass the very sphere of the political itself.

In his role as Laclau's ultimate "empty signifier," the leader is stretched so thin as to be an almost incoherent figure. Yet Laclau is adamant: emptiness here does not mean that the signifier lacks an accompanying signified. Laclau (2005) writes instead that "we mean that there is a place, within the system of signification, which is constitutively irrepresentable; in that sense it remains empty, but this is an emptiness which I can signify, because we are dealing with a void *within* signification" (p. 105.). The empty signifier is thus a particularity that comes to stand for "an unachievable fullness" (p. 71). Accordingly, Laclau critiques Slavoj Žižek's insistence upon the presence of "a signifier without a signified," writing that it is "self-defeating: it could only mean 'noise' and, as such, would be outside the system of signification" (p. 105). For our purposes, the distinction Laclau draws between his own "unachievable fullness" and Žižek's absent signified is less important than his concern about noise. Žižek, after all, is not interested in a generic absence but a substantive one, drawing instead on Jacques Lacan's kernel of the real as the site of difference that unifies a political totality.[6] What I think we can take from Laclau's critique of Žižek is that noise is actually something always co-present with political unification

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[6] Laclau and Žižek's back-and-forth, though fundamentally about Lacanian concepts that will not be explored in this thesis, is nevertheless helpful to understand what Laclau's theory might look like in practice.

through signification. We can think of noise as not just the contents of this over-determined void, but what envelops its contours, leaking out in fits and hisses.[7]

In *Cruel Optimism,* Lauren Berlant (2011) describes how politicians like George W. Bush wish for a kind of "ambient noise" of political communication: an affective messaging that not only evades the "filter" that separates a leader from the people, but precedes speech and the political debates and negotiations of solidarity it engenders. They write, "Uncertainty is the material that Bush wished to bracket. His desire for a politics of ambient noise, prepropositional transmission, and intuitive reciprocity sought to displace the filtered story of instability and contradiction from the center of sociality" (p. 225). Our sense of the political and our place within it depends not just upon the flashpoints through which articulations are forged and signifiers gain coherence, but the way these processes are extended in arenas we might consider un- or extra-political: the atmosphere, ambience, and noise.

Following Lauren Berlant and Paul Roquet, I use the term ambient to highlight the often banal media forms and traces that permeate our immediate environments, mediating affective experiences and political expectations. Although these everyday, environmental media are "perceived largely through indirect attention" (Roquet, 2016, p. 2), our attunements to and engagements with them offer access points via which we can participate in and orient ourselves toward a larger sense of political atmosphere. Roquet writes, "In everyday English, *ambience* is a synonym for *atmosphere*, the dispersed and overall tone or feeling of a place. But unlike its more objective sibling, *ambience* always implies a more subjective element of mediation at work: some kind of agency behind the production of mood and a focus on the human body attuning to

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[7] This is more metaphorical than empirical: following Attali (1985) and others, I aim to treat noise as a powerful site of politics, though with more ambiguous potential than he ascribes to it. Noise conceived of this way is "not really a kind of sound but a metadiscourse of sound and its social interpretation" (Novak, 2015, p. 126), one that nevertheless can help us think about different attunements to visually "noisy" media environments.

it" (2016, p. 3). Ambience foregrounds what is produced in the background, whether a hum of activity or a quality of the air, that offers a condition of possibility that we may interact with or even produce ourselves but often overlook in its banal persistence.

The consequences of ignoring the often-ambient nature of political engagement become increasingly severe when what is at stake is the definition of the people themselves. Within a theorization of populism as a political logic, with the populist leader as the foremost empty signifier, how we understand what is heard and what is overheard, and what it means to encounter and participate in politics through the register of the ambient, is crucial. It can help us divine how the populist form of organization comes to reach people, what it comes to mean to them, and which possibilities of action and identification it grants them. This ambient nature of populist mediation is not something limited to one platform or one media system; rather, it is a lens through which we can conceptualize, and hopefully respond to, the ways in which the populist leader figures into the background of citizens' lives.

In this respect, my thesis diverges from other investigations of populism and media, especially emerging media. As interest in populism has grown, scholars have offered different explanations for the part new media — and in particular, social media — have played in populism's contemporary rise. In their overview of the literature, Engesser, Fawzi & Larsson (2017) outline the "online opportunity structure" that social media platforms afford to populist actors: the internet's democratizing potential strengthens claims of popular sovereignty; populism's people-centrism is facilitated through direct connections to audiences; the anti-elitism of new media are suited to populism's anti-elite rhetoric; the homophily of filter bubbles and echo chambers help populists exclude the Other; populist leaders can grow their charisma through personal connections to audiences; and the simplicity of populist messaging allows it to

flourish in the attention economy (p. 1282). Although some of these factors undoubtedly play a role in aiding populist figures, they are ultimately just part of a larger theoretical connection I see between media and populism. Instead, I draw on theorists working at the intersection of media and politics, especially Lauren Berlant (2011) and Paul Roquet (2016), to ask what it means for populism that media extends evermore into the ambient, colouring our perceptions of the world we inhabit and the choices we can make within it.

Methods

In the following chapters, I use both existing and found archives of ephemeral media to trace how these larger theoretical debates about ambient populism play out through the media forms that citizens encounter. I look at different scales to highlight how idiosyncratic media traces and utterances can be both individually striking and yet feel like drops in a larger wave of political affect. The examples I draw on are, in their own ways, generic and yet specific; it is the slippage between these two modes that I find most compelling. This is why I read specific Trump tweets and Evo graffiti at once for their formal properties and for the way they work to produce the feeling of a larger whole.

First, I draw on individual tweets from @realDonaldTrump to situate his account within a moment at which much older conservative media styles were becoming particularly legible online. In the period when I conducted my research, Trump's account had been banned from Twitter. Using the Trump Twitter Archive, I read every @realDonaldTrump tweet from the start of his posting to the end of 2012 to get a sense of how he came to develop his unique style. The volume of tweets in later years made this approach unfeasible, and following 2012, I sorted the tweets by year and read the ones with the most likes. The tweets that I use in the thesis are a mix of the early ones, popular ones from later years, and tweets highlighted in the secondary

literature. I also draw from the discourse surrounding his tweets in traditional media and the academic literature to understand the role they played as a corpus. In regarding them as such, my aim is not to flatten them. Rather, it is to ask what it means that they came to feel, even in their very specificity, like part of the ambient register of American politics.

The tension between the particularity of media traces and the generality of their corpus is perhaps clearer in my second chapter. Ella Chmielewska (2007) counterposes the radical, self-disclosing way in which graffiti is often styled with the experience of encountering "the ubiquity of its collective form" (p. 161). This is especially true of the Bolivian referendum graffiti I discuss, walking as it does the line between election signage, political propaganda, and street art. Indeed, its very simplicity, often taking the simple form of the words "yes" and "no," was what made it stay with me years after I lived in La Paz. Part of this generality was reinforced in my struggle to find much record of it; although I include several stills from Juan Tamayo's (2020) documentary series Nuevo Mundo, a comprehensive archive does not, to my knowledge, exist. In the absence of one, I used the Street View function on Google Maps to retrace the route I took to work when I lived there in July and August of 2017. The records from Street View are their own, powerful archive of the Cotahuma district of La Paz. Many of the places that would later bear referendum graffiti held pro-Evo graffiti related to the previous presidential election. Being able to digitally walk the same streets allowed me to add nuance to the larger phenomenon, bringing in the site-specific contributions of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood.

This archive was not without its limitations. Google Street View is arbitrary: it fixes the image of the streetscape in March 2015, when it was captured by the team's 360-degree camera. It is also impermanent, under threat of being updated, and the images replaced, at any time. Yet what began as an archival constraint ultimately added to my analysis. I was able to see how the

tweets and graffiti in the time frame that I cared about were sedimented atop prior years of media. This persistence of ephemeral media — the way in which it can extend across time and space, feeling all-encompassing and yet impermanent — became a focal point for the chapter. This was also informed by the memories of conversations I had while in Bolivia, the academic literature around Evo Morales's political program, and other ephemeral political media I accessed through the Digital Archive of Latin American and Caribbean Ephemera at Princeton University.

These questions about the particular and the general of ambient media are especially important in terms of how they condition people's relationship to politics. Laclau and Mouffe see adopting a left populism as necessary to fight against both neoliberal politics-as-usual and the ascendance of far-right populism. Mouffe (2018) is especially insistent that given the current conjuncture, in which the neoliberal consensus has fallen apart, the time is ripe for an approach that values liberal political institutions but radically reinscribes their democratic content. Democracy will, by her telling, take centre stage as the empty signifier in a left populism's capacity to construct the people and with it, the solidarities needed for radical political action. It is because I find Mouffe's call to action so compelling that I want to think through the possibility of another actor standing in for the place of democracy in this struggle. It is by looking to the ambient media of populism, and specifically of the populist persona, that we can appreciate both the possibility and the constraint that accompany such a move.

CHAPTER ONE: TRUMP TWEETS AND OVERCOMING CONTRADICTION

My use of social media is not Presidential – it's MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL.

Make America Great Again!

-@realDonaldTrump, July 1, 2017

In the wake of Trump's shock 2016 election win, liberal commentators seeking an explanation for his appeal clung to the idea that Trump "tells it like it is" — and everyone from Republican primary voters (see Gamio & Clement, 2016) to Hollywood actors[8] seemed to agree. Yet if Trump is a shameless liar, how could so many people feel he was telling the truth? In part, it is because he appeared to speak truth to power in his constant efforts to expose the hypocrisy of the governing elites. For Elizabeth Markovits (2016), Trump shows how "frank speech can become just another form of cynical pandering," but the "hyper-sincerity" of this speech still holds significant appeal (n.p.). Trump's appeal was also less about his truth value than his performance of authenticity, Martin Montgomery (2017) argues. His informal style and seemingly improvisational speech allowed him to "claim to be a vernacular authentic voice of himself and at one and the same time to be voice of the people" (p. 636).

These explanations hew closely to accounts of "populist style," which Benjamin Moffitt (2016) describes through its "appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite', 'bad manners' and the performance of crisis, breakdown or threat" (p. 45). The trouble with these explanations is not that they are wrong, but that they position political actors' success in terms of whether their performance style ticked the right boxes. This leaves the question of which leaders can carry this

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[8] E.g., *Matt Damon Says Donald Trump Tells it Like it Is,* The Hollywood Reporter, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLrIk61V5PY.

populist style, or can reputably perform authenticity, almost as murky as at the start. After all, not everyone can pull off what Trump can. The Tea Party may have reached people's paranoid "deep story," but they did not reach the White House. Mitt Romney's populist performance — including his infamous, avowed love of "hot dog" — was widely derided, and not just by the usual suspects of the liberal commentariat. Moreover, they do not dig deeper into what else might be conveyed in supporters' assertions of authenticity. Trump spoke frankly, but frank speech is not enough to coalesce the broad-based movement Trump amassed. Trump had bad manners, but his mannerisms and sayings were not what the average American would have used.

Looking at Twitter, I argue that one part of what made Trump's populist performance feel authentic to people can be traced back to the affinity between right-wing populist communication styles and online trolling practices. On another level, Trump was able to embody contradiction, communicating stronger and more intense affects than past presidents and allowing Americans to live out their deepest fears and desires through him. Finally, his blundering, near constant virality was enough to capture Twitter, and in doing so, the majority of the news media ecosystem, helping the Trump era feel atmospheric and investment in him feel safe. At each level, I draw parallels with Ronald Reagan — his folksiness, his fantasy, and his failings — to show the long history and the novel dangers of Trump as a mass media populist.

Occultatio and media synchronicity

Before Donald Trump, there was Ronald Reagan: an entertainer-president who captivated the nation with his speech. Reagan communicated populist authenticity through the affective power of his voice, the folksiness of his rhetoric, and the consistency of his words. In spite of the different position these two figures occupy within the American imaginary, we can see something of Reagan's style in Trump's own vernacular folksiness, pathos and ethos, and

repetition (Montgomery, 2017). These features certainly help in the performance of populism, but these performances do not exist in a vacuum. In addition to asking why Trump's populist performance worked on individuals, it's important to understand why it worked on platforms. Both presidents communicated in a way that suited the media they were communicating through, and much has changed since Reagan's day.

Nicole Hemmer (2016) documents how the American right-wing media ecosystem became more extreme post-Reagan, with the rise of Fox News as well as shock jocks like Rush Limbaugh. On these platforms, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other conservative rhetoric has often been couched through projection and disavowal: it is not they but their liberal enemies who are hateful; they are not saying something hateful, but if they did, it would go like this. This form is one Trump has used on Twitter to great effect, especially when in the form of a joke. The knowing wink and unabashed taunting of Trump's insults in particular show both how he resembles Reagan and departs from him; this departure marks an evolution of populist conservative rhetoric in America that enables it to fit well within logics and vernaculars of online trolling.

On Twitter and off it, Trump is rude. Of the top-performing 2016 election tweets Perez et al. (2019) analyze, "up to 53% of his tweets include texts that break the Internet etiquette of civilized language" (p. 24). This incivility extends to colour most of his political commentary. Trump's mixture of casual language for serious political matters ("The W.H.O. really blew it [...]"),[9] homespun expressions ("The big city machines are corrupt [...]"),[10] and old-fashioned extremism ("California is going to hell. Vote Trump!")[11] are a marked departure from the gee-

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[9] April 7, 2020. This tweet, and all others referenced in this chapter, are found on the Trump Twitter Archive: https://www.thetrumparchive.com/.

[10] November 8, 2020.

[11] October 12, 2020.

shucks folksiness of past presidents like Reagan. When he tweets about "winners" and "losers," Trump's acknowledgement of fellow winners feels measured, as if he is judiciously meting out praise, while his indictment of the loser is often excessive. Compare the late-2011 Rosie O'Donnell diss, "I feel sorry for Rosie's new partner in love whose parents are devastated at the thought of their daughter being with @Rosie--a true loser,"[12] with the reined-in show of approval, "Oprah will end up doing just fine with her network--she knows how to win. @Oprah."[13] They share a similar form, but Rosie is a "true loser" whose association makes people "devastated," whereas Oprah will do "just fine" because "she knows how to win." This kind of indulgent enjoyment in speaking punitively about others often translates to online engagement, such that it is perhaps no wonder that remarks like, "Every time I speak of the haters and losers I do so with great love and affection. They cannot help the fact that they were born fucked up!"[14] are some of his most popular.

From the early days of Trump's Twitter, he took the time to belittle other politicians: "[Senator] Barney Frank looked disgusting – nipples protruding – in his blue shirt before Congress. Very very disrespectful."[15] Linguistic anthropologist Adam Hodges (2017) notes Trump's distinctive style of insults:

1. Take a derogatory noun.

2. Add a gratuitous modifier.

3. Sprinkle with vacuous intensifiers.

4. Repeat. (n.p.)

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[12] December 14, 2011. A thousand likes.
[13] April 5, 2012. A thousand likes.
[14] September 28, 2014. 81 thousand likes.
[15] December 21, 2011.

Examples abound in the list of "the 598 people, places and things" Trump insulted on Twitter between June 15, 2015, and May 25, 2019, compiled by *New York Times* journalists (Lee and Quealy, 2016 [2019], n.p.). Google and Twitter? "So biased toward the Dems it is ridiculous!" James Comey? "Either very sick or very dumb," and "corrupt, a total sleaze!" U.S. immigration policies? "Weak and very stupid." The language is simple with a strong affective hook. Repetition is key here: of words within phrases ("very very"), of terms like weak and stupid, failing and corrupt, and of monikers: Joe Biden as "Sleepy Joe," Steve Bannon as "Sloppy Steve" — and who could forget "Crooked Hillary"?

Trump is not the first president to be known for what Travis Andrews (2020) calls a "knack for coining phrases that are adored by his base and become pebbles in the shoes of his critics" (n.p.). Paul Erickson (1985) points to the "constant transformation of political material into stories," often full of humour and emotion, as what set Reagan's rhetoric apart (p. 5). Reagan drew "from our contemporary folklore in forms as diverse as movies, television, and the like" (Ibid.) and conjured "stock symbolic characters … simply drawn men and women" (Ibid., p. 51) for his political and moral teachings. With Trump, the most obvious use of pop culture characters is in his uncomfortable characterizations of his foes. When he asked, in a series of tweets from July 11, 2019, whether the public "could imagine … Alfred E. Newman [sic]" or "a very nervous and skinny version of Pocahontas" as president, he was drawing on well-known icons of American pop culture. With *MAD Magazine's* Alfred E. Neuman, Trump called up images of a goofy-looking, sexless schoolboy, an apt comparison for the awkward, Harvard-educated Pete Buttigieg. His moniker of Pocahontas for Elizabeth Warren became even more notorious, as the senator refused to back down from her dubious claims to Native American

heritage. The image of Elizabeth Warren as Pocahantas was so incongruous as to make her completely ridiculous.

Toby Bates (2011) writes that the consistency of Reagan's speech was one of its greatest assets in permeating the media ecosystem. "Once [Reagan] decided on an idea or position, he focused, and regardless of audience or location his words repeated the same phrases delivered at the same cadence" (Bates, 2011, p. 11). Similarly, Trump's public persona while president was strengthened by the consistency with the "voice" he cultivated in the public eye in the years prior: there was an authenticity to it that came from using the platform over a number of years to voice his own opinions.[16] In 2012, tweets from @realDonaldTrump could opine on anything from Putin's body language toward Obama ("really bad")[17] or the voting process at the Emmys ("all politics").[18] By the time he was in office, Trump was tweeting about his own meetings with Putin ("a great success")[19] and the voting process in the US election ("RIGGED").[20] That is not to say Trump has remained static in his posting style; Trump's tweets had a more engaged, conversational tone when addressed primarily to his base and took a more formal, strident tone during a campaign (Clarke and Grieve, 2019). We can see this shift in tone in his holiday posts. Before he became a serious presidential candidate, most of Trump's holiday well wishes were addressed to "even the haters and losers," no matter the occasion: Father's Day, Thanksgiving, the fourth of July, Easter, even Memorial Day.[21] By late 2015, however, this was replaced by a

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[16] With 34 thousand likes: "I have always been the same person-remain true to self.The [sic] media wants me to change but it would be very dishonest to supporters to do so!" August 14, 2016.

[17] "Putin has no respect for our President --- really bad body language." June 19, 2012.

[18] "The Emmys are all politics, that's why, despite nominations, The Apprentice never won--even though it should have many times over." September 24, 2012.

[19] "The meeting between President Putin and myself was a great success, except in the Fake News Media!" July 17, 2018.

[20] "RIGGED ELECTION!" November 25, 2020; December 4, 2020; December 9, 2020.

[21] The main timeframe for this is 2013-2015, though he edges toward it beginning in 2012 with reference to his "enemies."

simple, "MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!" at the end of almost every holiday greeting. Once elected, he was able to shift between the two, as demonstrated by his first New Year's post once in office, written in the classic style: "Happy New Year to all, including to my many enemies and those who have fought me and lost so badly they just don't know what to do. Love!"[22]

Trump's most engaging tweets, punctuating his mostly mundane commentary on the news of the day, are characterized by a sly sense of humour or a call to arms. The presidential Trump has more of the latter, with tweets often containing attention-grabbing devices like all caps and exclamation marks. Each of Trump's top 10 most liked tweets, all from the fall of 2020, contains at least one word in all caps; half of them are entirely in all caps, including "WE WILL WIN!" (November 10, 2020) and "VOTE! VOTE! VOTE!" (November 3, 2020).[23] Similarly, Perez et al. (2019) find that Trump used exclamation marks in a third of their tweet sample, while Clinton "barely use[d] this device" (p. 24). That these shouts into a digital void are Trump's most successful tweets should tell us about the power of simplicity and repetition. This is echoed by Trump's Twitter penchant to return to touchstones like "fake news," present in almost a thousand of his tweets, and "MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN," found in eight of his top 100 most liked tweets and almost 600 tweets overall, with #MAGA is present in similar numbers.

We should not forget, however, earlier admissions that using Twitter is "easy when it's fun."[24] Trump's frank and incongruous tweets are also a major part of his appeal. "The new Pope is a humble man, very much like me, which probably explains why I like him so much!"[25] and

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[22] December 31, 2016. 300 thousand likes.

[23] Some of these tweets also had accompanying media, another important factor in their popularity.

[24] November 10, 2012.

[25] December 23, 2013. Seven thousand likes.

"Sorry losers and haters, but my I.Q. is one of the highest -and you all know it! Please don't feel so stupid or insecure,it's [sic] not your fault"[26] both received thousands of likes. Such tweets illustrate Trump's "perverse style," which Joshua Gunn (2020) writes "is almost perfectly, rhetorically realized in the ironic trope of *occultatio* and its related formal patterns of disavowal: *I am not going to speak about the reality I affirm by denying it, or I know what I am doing is bad, but I am going to do it anyway*" (p. 75). When you know to look for it, you find occultatio again and again. On October 28, 2012, Trump put out back-to-back tweets about Bette Midler, to a few thousand likes apiece: ".@BetteMidler talks about my hair but I'm not allowed to talk about her ugly face or body --- so I won't. Is this a double standard?" and "While @BetteMidler is an extremely unattractive woman, I refuse to say that because I always insist on being politically correct." Although much of this tweeting predated his presidency, the impulse apparently never left, and it was five years later that he tweeted, "Why would Kim Jong-un insult me by calling me ''old,'' when I would NEVER call him ''short and fat?'' Oh well, I try so hard to be his friend - and maybe someday that will happen!"[27] Occultatio allows Trump to invoke affects and logics that he claims to disavow — he may say he is "the least racist person you know" (qtd. in Ott & Dickinson, 2019, p. 17) but a majority of his tweets mentioning an ethnic or Indigenous group are negative (Coe & Griffin, 2020) — and this ability to say one thing but mean another is one of his greatest assets.

Many have remarked on the symbiotic relationship between Trump and Fox News, but Trump also owes a major debt to "shock jock" conservative pundits like Rush Limbaugh. Rising to prominence during a leadership vacuum on the American right, Limbaugh became a Republican kingmaker through his long-running talk news program, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*,

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[26] May 8, 2013. 155 thousand likes.
[27] November 11, 2017. 534 thousand likes.

beginning in Sacramento in 1984 and going national in 1988. Limbaugh was not the first shock jock, but he was the most successful at parlaying a style of talk radio that political commentary buoyed up by offensive humour into power within the conservative movement. Nicole Hemmer (2021) argues that Limbaugh's racism and misogyny prefigured Trump's own boundary-crossing rhetoric, both in style and intention. His insult humour was hardly clever: calling a thirteen-year-old Chelsea Clinton a dog or female journalists "infobabes" was enjoyably misogynystic, and nicknaming Adam Schiff "pencilneck" was crude but apt, but these were unimaginative insults and insider references, not the catchy alliterations and pop culture classics that drew in broad audiences to Trump. Yet there is a clear continuity between the role that these insults played for the two media titans, as well as the influence of the platforms within which each of them operated. Below is an excerpt from Hemmer's 2021 appearance on the *Know Your Enemy* podcast, discussing an infamous Limbaugh song, "Barack the Magic Negro":

> Sam Adler Bell: … the argument was, Black people are not the butt of this joke, liberals are the butt of this joke. You're humourless if you don't get it.
>
> Nicole Hemmer: Yeah, and then really the point of it was the transgressive thrill of continuously saying "Negro" on the radio. ("The Rush Limbaugh Show (w/ Nicole Hemmer)," 2021)

In this example, the thrill of flirting with racial slurs is couched in an accusation that the other side is using racial stereotypes for political gain. This little bit of projection, complete with winking denials of its motivations, is one way in which parts of shock jock media prefigured the occultatio for which Trump became famous.

Limbaugh's ability to engage the amount of people he did was greatly aided, Hemmer (2016) writes, by a confluence of legal and political changes in the 1980s. Reagan's repeal of the

Fairness Doctrine,[28] the opening of the FM dial, and advances in telephone technology netted Limbaugh a wider and more engaged pool of listeners, allowing him to eventually cross over into TV and print: "Had Limbaugh stayed local, he likely would have faded into history" (p. 261). Today, Trump is helped by the structure of Twitter in fostering what Zizi Papacharissi (2015) calls "affective publics." Papacharissi posits affect "as the energy that drives, neutralizes, or entraps networked publics" (p. 7), such that "newer media invite people to *feel* their own place in current events, developing news stories, and various forms of civic mobilization" (p. 4). Affect, here, is positioned as both what is facilitated by the structures of networked publics and what is driving the political expressions and connections therein.

It is not a stretch to say that the media logics, technological affordances, and political possibilities of Twitter in the 2010s provided Trump the opportunity to gain traction with an updated take on Limbaugh's brand. Whitney Phillips (2016) notes that Trump's success on the medium has often been attributed to his Twitter trolling. William Merrin (2018) describes trolling as "a baiting, a sport, a playing, that more than anything aims at those who get above themselves, or set themselves above others — at those asserting, or in, authority" (p. 202). Trolling someone typically involves engaging with them through mockery, often in a concerted and anonymous manner, to bait them into a response. Its hallmarks include ironic detachment, offensiveness, and a certain disregard for the truth. Trolling someone online often involves adopting a posture of indifference, even though trolling attacks can be vicious, concerted and extremely personal.

Trump's simple, sticky insults — such as the infamous "crooked Hillary," mentioned in over 400 of his tweets[29] — show a puerility and a doggedness to belittle opponents that fit well

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[28] This had mandated a balanced coverage of contentious issues in broadcast journalism.
[29] This includes #CrookedHillary.

within trolling logics. When these insults got engagement, they were continued; when they did not, they were soon abandoned (Phillips, 2015). Moreover, the Trump campaign was all too willing to retweet right-wing trolls, or even employ them (Merrin, 2018). Under former Campaign Chair Steve Bannon, members of the Trump team monitored pro-Trump online communities to cull memes and other content from them. To take one example, on June 21, 2019, Trump tweeted a video parody of a *Time Magazine* cover. The original cover, on the theme of how Trumpism outlasts Trump, shows a series of election signs for Trump every four years for the next twenty years. Trump's video goes from sign to sign with dramatic music in the background, until the final Trump sign, which skips ahead by intervals of 100 years, then more, until ending with the message "TRUMP 4EVA" (The Hill, 2019). The video was meant to get a rise out of people, playing on the common liberal fear that Trump was instigating a type of politics that would outlive him and hurt American democracy. The resulting outrage could then be enjoyed by Trump supporters, who would likely view those threats as ridiculous. If we accept Merrin's (2018) proposition that trolling's ironic posture masks its serious intentions, the video is at once an exaggerated joke and an expression of a desire to never relinquish power – a desire that repeats, often followed by statements like "just kidding," in several of Trump's tweets.

However, Phillips (2016) and others take issue with accounts that tie Trump's success on the platform to either his trolling or that of his base.[30] As scholars of these online communities, Whitney Phillips, Jessica L. Beyer and Gabriella Coleman (2017) have pushed for greater complexity within the Trump trolling narratives. They argue that current alt-right actors are not reducible to classic 4chan trolls, nor are the logics that brought Trump to office reducible to the ones that governed this trolling. It is true that to speak of Trump as a troll in this way is an

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[30]We can see this trend in a recent book by journalist Dale Beran (2019), which traces a direct line from early trolling on sites like 4chan to the "toxic troll army [that] accidentally memed Trump into office."

oversimplification of the history of trolling as subcultural practice; at the same time, we cannot ignore that the "troll" has firmly entered our vernacular, expanding to encompass a wide array of online actors with an often-loose resemblance of practices. In a way, the incoherence of the troll as a category is precisely the point: it has reached the cultural saturation of a shorthand. For Trump to be a troll in the common parlance means that he is recognizable within online life — that his actions and words are legible. Instead of pigeonholing him within a multifaceted online subculture, one to which he markedly does not belong, this can and should spark discussion about what it means that Trump's online speech resembles the Reagans and Limbaughs of yore and yet works with the digital rhetorics of the day. Such a treatment of Trump's fit within online trolling would decidedly not overlook how his antagonism was "symptomatic of much deeper, much more immediate cultural malaise," as Phillips, Beyer & Coleman (2017, n.p.) caution against.

In fact, if part of this malaise comes with the widespread recognition of incoherence characterizing contemporary politics, then Trump's occultatio works on multiple levels. Darin Barney (2014) writes, "The definitive gesture of contemporary ideology is the fetishistic disavowal — "*Je sais bien, mais quand même …*" (I know very well, but all the same …) — which, together with the thumbs-up and thumbs-down signalling of likes and dislikes online, suggests the essence of publicity in the emerging media environment" (p. 78). Fetishistic disavowal in a liberal politician is in the typical posture of communicating support for some progressive policy without any real commitment to action, but this style becomes more untenable by the year, especially on a platform like Twitter, where every political platitude is met with a dozen entreaties to action. For conservatives like the late Rush Limbaugh, this disavowal takes the form of inciting hatred, barely hidden by the form of a joke. Trump's brand of occultatio is

almost a parody of this form, often enjoyable in itself as well as for the ugly affects it incites. In this way it is a much better fit online, where at least some users see value in doing it "'for the lulz' — trolling parlance for antagonistic laughter derived from the infliction of emotional distress" (Milner & Phillips, 2017, p. 160).

One unsettling example is the people who troll online memorial pages. Speaking to these "death trolls," Whitney Phillips finds that they were responding to the "tragedy merchants" of the mainstream media, targeting the "excessive sentimentality and a lack of critical thinking" of strangers and their "empty condolences" (Ibid., pp. 160-161). We can read this kind of trolling through the opposition between cynicism and kynicism that Peter Sloterdijk introduces in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Trump's funny, often contradictory insults communicate a kynicism that, because of the history of trolling on the platform, fits within a vernacular and an understandable intent to unsettle power, for good or for ill. Despite Trump's specific posting voice, and his position as an oligarch-cum-president, Trump's insults nevertheless can be seen as allying him more with the common poster than his rival Hillary Clinton was ever able to achieve.

Clinton's struggle to connect with the American people is well-documented, on Twitter as well as off it. Perez et al. (2019) find that, in the lead-up to the election, Clinton more often positioned herself as a fighter for everyday people in her tweets than Trump. For instance, "Clinton would often tweet quotations of her own speeches, using the first person plural pronouns to emphasize her identification with the common folk" (Perez et al., 2019, p. 21). She was not the first Democratic candidate to dip a toe into populist waters — just think of Barack Obama's famous 2008 slogan, "Yes We Can," for its "we" of a united American people standing for change — but with Clinton such posturing came off as farfetched. In part, this was because Clinton proved an especially difficult candidate to de-professionalize (Enli, 2017): certainly

because of the hurdles women politicians face in presenting a positive public image, but equally because of how the enduring stiffness in Clinton's public appearances became meme fodder. Whether it was her cringeworthy appeal for a "Pokémon GO to the polls"[31] or the photo of her looking shellshocked upon entering the modest kitchen of a public housing unit,[32] efforts to make Clinton appear casual and relatable often ended with online ridicule. Her online presence was no better: when she tweeted, "How does your student loan debt make you feel? Tell us in 3 emojis or less,"[33] she faced a vicious ratio, in which the number of responses and quote tweets swelled to the number of regular likes and retweets. Though many of Clinton's supporters were "online," her communications had little other traction among dominant users and communities. For many, the only enjoyment to be found in this communication style was in mocking it.

If Clinton was often trying to invoke a people that was not there, by contrast, Perez et al. (2019) find that Trump's Twitter rhetoric relied heavily on apostrophe, as he addressed over half of the tweets in their sample to someone not present. When @realDonaldTrump tweets call out to "you," readership implies community, however narcissistic and individualistic Trump himself might be. Yet even though Trump's take on shock-jock conservatism succeeded online, seemingly immune as it was to the claims of hypocrisy and irrelevance that dogged Hillary Clinton, this kind of fit with new media logics is not only accessible to figures on the right. Gabriella Coleman's (2014) writing on Anonymous' history of progressive political activism shows that trolling opens the door for a different kind of politics on the left too. Even if there is positive potential in kynical trolling to unsettle the cynical reason that dominates contemporary

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[31] "Pokémon GO to the Polls," *Know Your Meme,* 2018, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pokemon-go-to-the-polls.

[32] "PsBattle: Hillary Clinton in East Harlem," *Reddit,* 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/photoshopbattles/comments/4ex3st/psbattle_hillary_clinton_in_east_harlem/.

[33] Hillary Clinton (@HillaryClinton), "How does your student loan debt make you feel? Tell us in 3 emojis or less." August 12, 2015, https://twitter.com/hillaryclinton/status/631538115514007553?lang=en.

politics, it is worth considering why the American right is better positioned to take advantage of this opportunity, as Trump shows how powerfully compelling and corrosive such a kynicism can be when in the wrong hands.

Affect and political contradiction

To understand why Trump's contradictory insults were so powerful, we must move beyond a platform level to a larger political one. By embracing contradiction, Trump makes coherent a wide range of policies and ideologies, breaking ground for both institutional violence and affective identification. This is the work of what Stuart Hall (1988) terms "authoritarian populism," a radical right-wing response to liberal democratic decay. Hall describes how Thatcherism, as prototypical example, "constituted not a discourse, but a field of discourses in which the interpellations of the one summon up and condense a series of others" (Hall, p. 144). Like Thatcher and Reagan before him, Trump unified a chain of popular demands, standing above them and encompassing them to forge "a popular identity which is something qualitatively more than the simple summation of the equivalential links" (Laclau, 2005, p. 77). Hall describes how Thatcherism was adept at "articulating the field of popular ideologies sharply to the right":

> Some of the keys to this success lie in its wide appeal and 'common touch'; its inclusive range of references (for example, its ability to condense moral, philosophical, and social themes, not normally thought of as 'political', within its political discourse); its proven capacity to penetrate the traditional ideological formations of sections of the working class and petty bourgeoisie; its unremitting 'radicalism' (for instance, it buried the competing positions of the Heathite 'respectable' right without ceremony); its taking up of themes much neglected in competing ideologies. (p. 141)

There are many of Laclau's "empty signifiers" that kept Thatcherism coherent: it relied heavily on discourses of law and order while casting the classic conservative shopkeeper figure as the stand-in for the people, both of which we may now take as par-for-the-course conservatism but which were given new potency in this era. By strategic use and recombination of popular signifiers and unpopular ideologies, Thatcherism was able to open up entirely new political prospects, all ultimately tied affectively and symbolically to the leader herself. Although he operates within a network of many actors, Trump, with his words and his tweets, has also cohered a set of discourses and field of affects with well-chosen signifiers, perhaps most critically the epithet "crooked" he attached to Hillary Clinton. His tweets describing "Crooked Hillary Clinton" pack a lot in, also routinely smearing "her character, her political track record, and her family (namely her husband, former President Bill Clinton)" (Ross & Caldwell, 2020, p. 20), while often also positioning "himself as honest, forthright and uncorrupted" (Pelled et al., 2018, p. 183). With the repetition of one word, he also signaled his fight against the corruption of incumbent politicians like the Clintons, and the bloated and secretive government apparatus he claimed they serve.

Following Laclau, the importance of a figure like Trump or Thatcher in cohering a set of political possibilities makes more sense when you see populism as a fundamental political logic. The populist leader is the excluded element from the group; placing him above the chain of political demands that the group is linking together secures this otherwise unwieldy coalition and gives it enduring meaning. Laclau (2005) writes that the further a society gets from a liberal democracy, which treats social demands as particular and separate instead of popular and interlinked, "the more it depends, for its coherence, on this transcendent, singular moment. But the extreme form of singularity is an individuality. In this way, almost imperceptibly, the

equivalential logic leads to singularity, and singularity to identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader" (p. 100). In this framing, there is no innate rationale for demands or discourses to be linked in the way they are; the leader's role is to naturalize a contingent and provisional political project. If there were any question of how Trump's political movement triumphed while the Tea Party did not — though the latter made meaningful gains within the Republican Party — one reason is that Trump is able, as one man, to do what a collection of individuals could not.

Laclau does not offer a hard-and-fast rule on what form such "identification … with the name of the leader" always takes. Yet it is not a stretch to can apply his general ideas about social movements to the level of the individual, especially when the kinds of communities Laclau is interested in are just not a dominant part of political life for most Americans. If identification with the leader involves cohering a far-reaching and at times conflictual set of demands at one level, we can say that it often seems to rely on the leader embodying and overcoming contradiction through affective performance at another. Turning again to Reagan, we can see that this as well as his folksy style was a key element of his appeal. Liberal politicians often mistake the affective demands of the office as if they must carry the prevailing mood within their person. Often they fail to do even that convincingly, as with Clinton in 2016. Yet when they succeed, it is still no match for a Trump or a Reagan. Erickson (1985) writes about Reagan's appeal compared to his presidential rival, Democrat Walter Mondale:

> In essence, Mondale told Americans that they had troubles and that they could see those
> problems and that they would act true to their compassionate hearts. He told them to
> 'Pick a President who hurts when you hurt.' Ronald Reagan declared that everything was
> splendid, then smiled in the confidence that the people would choose him as the

embodiment of their national self-image, as a President who felt as good as they did. (p. 115)

Instead of mimicking Americans' emotions, Reagan spoke to their desires. By refusing to adhere to the prescripted affects of American political life, Reagan conveyed a power that Mondale did not, an abiding belief in the American people's goodness and capability that not only felt good to hear, but that was strong enough to be believed. This was how Reagan endeavoured to, as he claimed in his 1983 speech for the American Bar Association, "help Americans rise above pessimism by renewing their belief in themselves" (qtd. in Erickson, 1985, p. 2). It was not enough that he must overcome the prevailing pessimism: he must take the American people with him as well. Reagan here performs a dual contradiction: in the first, the positive image of the president is held up to bely the country's economic strife; here he resembles Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose "ebullient [persona] was a sign to many that the President was making good headway against the economic depression and the psychological depression that accompanies it" (Montgomery, 2017, p. 42). Yet Montgomery adds that the president's warm demeanour contradicts his own cold-hearted policies: "A folksy warm Reagan signals a trustworthy leader to people who, at another level of awareness, fear that he is trigger happy or suspect that he cares little for the welfare of the poor, minorities, and women" (Ibid.).

This falls in line with the rising pressures placed on American presidents, documented by the shift from Jeffrey K. Tulis's (1987) "rhetorical presidency" to John J. DiIulio's (2007) "hyper-rhetorical presidency." These authors describe how the president increasingly seeks to accommodate rising expectations that the government is either unwilling or unable to meet. Given officials' desire to maintain the illusion of presidential control, more of American politics plays out via the rhetorical behaviour of the president (Holtzman, 2020). Over-promising and

under-delivering is to be expected from whoever holds that office, but to make up for it, personal performances of American values and popular sentiments are increasingly demanded, such that presidents must act out what Lauren Berlant describes as "the sense — if not the scene — of a more livable and intimate sociality" (Berlant, 2011, p. 227). This "fetishistic disavowal" (Barney, 2014) is not only normalized, but demanded in an increasingly incoherent, unmoored fashion, yet this also opens it up to greater critique. To try and reproduce Reaganite optimism in a post-Trump, post-Obama America would be a project doomed for failure. This misunderstanding of Reagan is at the heart of current attempts by members of the Democratic establishment to return to feel-good bipartisanship. Speaker of the House and Democratic stalwart Nancy Pelosi herself recently said that Reagan was her most often quoted president, and added, "The good humor of our president [Reagan] was really a tonic for the nation … the gentleman that he was" (qtd. in Roberts, 2022). Obama was a good-humoured gentleman president; his public perception of ineffectualness and his succession by Trump have made such nostalgia as alienating as it is resonant within the Democratic base.

One of the troubles plaguing the Democratic establishment is that they come across as having forgotten that Reagan's contradictions were contradictions at all; they seek to reproduce the same results without considering what actions and affects are needed in today's more hostile, more embittered political playing field. While the symbolic and affective work required of them is ever greater, their ability to recognize and channel Americans' pessimism — let alone help them "rise above" it — is not even what it once was. Trump, by contrast, is somehow both the apogee and the denial of the hyper-rhetorical president, speaking the contradiction as plainly as he does. He presents himself as all-powerful but with his hands eternally tied; he has the strength of the aggressor and the posture of the aggrieved. This relies, as Todd McGowan (2020) writes,

on "speaking to the fantasy of pure excess by convincing followers that they are beings of pure lack while others (immigrants, China, politically correct Hollywood elites) enjoy themselves excessively" (p. 172). At the same time, Trump's speech goes beyond self-victimization toward self-empowerment: Trump is not only an underdog facing an unjust, "rigged" system, but an all-powerful figure capable of clearing up the red tape and, of course, making America great again.

The fears Trump articulates are often about losing one's power and others taking one's place. Supporter Deena told CNN, "I come home and someone's occupying my house and they're eating my food and then they're taking the kids from my bed; they're taking the money out of my pocket. Why should we have to support someone else and then make our kids suffer, our families suffer?" (qtd. in Campbell, 2016, p. 17). This resembles the grievance narratives Hochschild (2016) finds are present among Tea Party supporters. As she illustrates, the Tea Party movement gained and mobilized supporters by accessing a highly affective "deep story" of white Americans being overtaken by a privileged underclass in the quest for the American dream. In the voice of a composite Tea Party supporter, she writes, "As you wait in this unmoving line, you're being asked to feel sorry for them all. You have a good heart. But who is deciding who you should feel compassion for?" (p. 136). This story tells people of their loss of affective control, as the liberal "compassion" involved in determining who is given the resources and protection of the state is experienced as affective compulsion. In reiterating these narratives again and again, Trump speaks to what supporters identify as their "want to feel safe" and "time to be brave" (qtd. in Campbell, 2016, p. 12).

Although Trump was able to ignite a deep story in conservative Americans, however, he seems very obviously to lack depth himself. Take Trump's favourite film, *Citizen Kane*. If you read the film in a Trumpian way, ignoring the moralizing about the crass emptiness of Kane's

life, the keen and enduring absence buried beneath mountains of opulence, *Kane* essentially poses the question: *What if a rich, powerful man was a mystery everyone wanted to solve?* Trying to find the centre of a figure like Kane or Trump is a futile exercise, but one the object of such inquiries nevertheless enjoys. Recall how, late one night, Trump set Twitter ablaze when he tweeted, "Despite the constant negative press covfefe."[34] Journalist Travis Andrews writes that he and others "jumped to cover the typo, as if it were a matter of national security" (Andrews, 2020, n.p.). Not six hours later it was deleted, and that morning Trump tweeted the follow-up, "Who can figure out the true meaning of 'covfefe' ??? Enjoy!" If "covfefe" is Trump's "rosebud," the typo signals that there is no sense, nothing that matters, beneath a surface presentation full of contradictions that allow for a myriad of interpretations and interpellations. For Trump, of course, there is delight to be found as his performance of spectacle is granted a depth of meaning it does not possess.

If there is something beneath, it is akin to the cry of a child. Aaron Schuster (2017) compares Trump to "the Kantian baby … an incredibly irascible and outraged creature filled with an explosive moral indignation" (n.p.), with Trump's tweets like a baby's cries. As with Reagan, Trump is not so much a vessel for what everyone is feeling, for what they know to be true, as for what they *want*. The sense of credibility Trump gains by articulating the frustrations of Americans is echoed by Janet, a former dog breeder, who says that Trump is "like one of us … he's still in tune with what everybody is wanting" (Ibid.). Truth is not just relative,[35] but completely beholden to this wanting: "It is as if Trump were dreaming of a language unfettered by words, like a body unhampered by organs or a State without the rule of law or Capital without limits — a totally slippery symbolic space, evacuated of meaningful content and constraints"

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[34] May 31, 2017.

[35] On Twitter, Trump was twice as likely to disqualify the source of information, and five times as likely to exaggerate, as his rival Hillary Clinton. Perez et al., 2019, p. 24.

(Schuster, 2017, n.p.). Such an approach to truth is not just liberating but immensely pleasurable for followers, who are not so much taken in by Trump as they are taken with him. Writing just after Trump was elected, Mark Hagood (2016) turned the misinformation hypothesis on its head with a similar claim: that "Trump supporters did not vote for him because they were misinformed online — rather, *they consumed and circulated misinformation because they loved Trump*, because it was an enormously pleasurable thing to do, and because they imagined (correctly) that it drove the educated classes crazy" (n.p.).

At the same time, Brian Connolly (2016) sees in Trump the figure of the "primal father" who forms a "metonymic relation" with America in which his blustering toughness stands in for national strength (n.p.). Trump even recognizes this to some extent, telling Megyn Kelly, "We need strength. We need energy. We need quickness and we need brain in this country to turn it around" (qtd. in Connolly, 2016). This rhetoric is echoed by supporters like Nick, a home inspector from New Hampshire, who underscores in a 2015 interview that "Donald Trump is strong" (qtd. in Campbell, 2016, p. 8). However, Nick quickly adds that this strength is due to a sort of emotional investment or transference: "He carries a sentiment and frustrations that I think a lot of Americans are going through and feeling right now. He's the one that's able to articulate that, and bring those frustrations to light. I believe him when he talks" (Ibid.). Trump matters not only because he can stand in for the nation but because he can stand strong and tall enough to carry what Americans are "going through." What Connolly tells us is that this ability to channel Americans' frustrations is not the full story; equally important is how Trump displays this strength, often through a puerility and misogyny that show him to be above the constraints of good taste, not to mention the truth and the law. Trump figures as "the sovereign who promises to declare a permanent state of exception because, in his authoritative telling, we are in a

permanent state of crisis, a permanent conflict. … This is telling it like it is, and it is perhaps, in the end, most clearly articulated in his willingness never to be held accountable to facts, and instead invent the world that he wants to govern" (Connolly, 2016, n.p.).

If this is the case, then identification with Trump is not based on direct resemblance; as Adam Smith stressed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the baby is a limit case for the idea of intersubjective understanding; we can relate to the baby without actually feeling as the baby feels, because to do so would be to access something inaccessible. Similarly, if Trump derives power as the "castrating father who claims, because he possesses the phallus … he can exceed the law" (Ibid.), Connolly reminds us that the phallus and its power are similarly out of reach. Yet it can be empowering to invest in such a powerfully incoherent figure, capacious enough to act on and through affective contradiction. Talk show host John Oliver mocked Trump for a court deposition which claimed that he estimated his net worth based in part on his "… feelings, even my own feelings … and that can change rapidly from day to day,"[36] but there is reason to take this seriously as a core element of Trump's appeal. It is perhaps what best allows him to embody contradiction so convincingly, and in doing so, make possible new avenues for feeling and action among his supporters. Writing about the appeal of outrage-based talk radio shows, Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj (2014) argue that "it is critical to look beyond what kinds of information audience members are seeking and ask about the experiences they desire" (p. 128). With a persona as rapacious as it is capacious, Trump speaks to supporters' desire "to feel represented in the social field, to experience those representations as *viable facilitations of [their] vitality*" (Santner, 2011, p. xiv).

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[36] Deposition from December 19, 2007, quoted in "Donald Trump: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO)," February 29, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnpO_RTSNmQ.

We see this made manifest in Trump's appetites. His predatory and proprietary comments about women, his need to be surrounded by conspicuous displays of wealth, and even his habit of posing beside vast quantities of fast food all call forth a deeper hunger. Satisfaction lies not in airing out grievances but avenging them, and savouring the fruits of this vengeance. Pansy Duncan (2017) recalls white supremacist Richard Spencer, for whom liberal tears are meant to be consumed — "so delicious," as one YouTube commenter puts it — or worn as cologne. These "liberal tears are configured not as expressions of liberal loss or as objects of conservative schadenfreude, but as vehicles of conservative generic desire … for the sentimental bounty of the liberal body" (p. 518). If Hochschild's "deep story" is to be believed, many conservative Americans resent being told who they must feel for. For many, this does not lead to independence so much as a desire to turn the tables. Trump's ability to both feed and stoke this hunger in Americans puts into question just how much reconciliation between these polarized camps is possible.

Movement through the mediasphere

It is clear that the outrageousness of many of Trump's tweets play a more substantive role in supporters' image of the 45th president. As Trump supporter Geno DiFabio says, "At first [his tweeting] made me nervous. I used to cringe — I'd say, 'Oh God, what's he going to say today?' Now, I love it. Now, if they would take it away from him, that would probably ruin his presidency" (qtd. in Olson, 2020). Yet as Ralph Schroeder (2018) argues, despite how much has been made of Donald Trump's communication practice of going directly to the people, his tweets were not direct missives to his supporters, because most of his supporters were not on Twitter. In their study of Twitter users, Jacob Groshek & Karolina Koc-Michalska (2017) find that "those active on social media are more likely to support Democratic populists than Republican

populists; consequently those who were more active social media users were also *less likely* to have supported Trump as their candidate" (p. 1401). Trump may have gone viral many times over on Twitter, but his success on the platform did not translate to support from the majority of users. That his many supporters were not active on Twitter does not diminish the impact of Trump's tweets, because they traveled far beyond the platform.

As is often noted, what is remarkable about Trump's tweets was their agenda-setting power. As Rod Carveth (2019) puts it, "When Trump issues a tweet, often early in the day, the media will cover it" (p. 184). With increased use of audience metrics and reliance on Twitter among journalists, Trump's more outrageous tweets were often fodder for news stories. When Trump ran for office, Twitter was the main social media site where journalists went to get sources, story leads, and industry chatter, as well as keep abreast of breaking news (Hedman, 2015; Hermida, 2010; Santana and Hopp, 2016; Vis, 2013). Media systems are important in determining the success of populist movements globally (Schroeder, 2018), and "Trump's campaign played perfectly to the communicative environment described, offering regular doses of sensationalism, novelty, and outrageous statements across multiple media" — for which Trump was rewarded with two to three times the attention from journalists than even his major Republican rivals for nominee (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020, p. 666). The play of conflict and incivility, the self-assertion and victimization, became media events in miniature to be discussed in clickbait web content, cable news shows, and ultimately people's homes and workplaces. This is because, if a politician captures Twitter, they are more than likely to capture the American media's attention as well.

With reference to French theorist of speed Paul Virilio, Gunn (2020) writes that Trump's posting gives journalists "high-speed whiplash," resulting in a "sort of breathless befuddlement

we see or hear on the more conversational news and political programs, especially cable talk shows" (p. 72) as journalists rush to keep up with what he could *possibly* be saying. By his account, the frenzied pace of online speech coupled with newsroom pressures to cover everything as it happens, lest they be scooped, destabilizes their and our powers of reflection. For Merrin (2018), "the speed of thought and speed of Twitter coalesc[e] into a mode of kinetic political violence," plunging us all "into chaos as [we] try to catch-up with what he's saying" (p. 212). This story of high-speed violence is echoed by Phillips and Milner (2020), who describe Trump's tweeting within a hybridized media system in terms of its "energy, roaring across platforms, across media, across dining room tables" (p. 79). In fact, this speed goes both ways: Bucy et al. (2020) write that during the initial Clinton-Trump debate for the 2016 US election, users who were second-screening via Twitter engaged more frequently with Trump, responding in particular to angry tonal cues and facial expressions he employed, and were able to convey their response online while they watched.

The speed that comes with instantaneous posting — Trump's ability to dash off a few tweets before bed and wake up to an international media circus — is a major component of what makes his posting so eventful, but we can also think of it in terms of how it allows him to tweet again and again, affording more opportunities to go viral. Amid a flurry of tweets, only one or two might see success, with the difference between, "Why would @BarackObama be spending millions of dollars to hide his records if there was nothing to hide?" and "For the sake of transparency, @BarackObama should release all his college applications and transcripts--both from Occidental and Columbia," in the thousands of likes.[37] Both tweets were published back to back on the same day, along with three more tweets on the subject, each allowing for a different sentence structure and mix of rhetorical devices. This style of tweeting is aided by the structure

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[37] July 17, 2012. That day he tweeted more than five times on the same subject, to varying success.

of Twitter, in which most users see tweets on a single news feed rather than individuals' pages. The algorithm has changed over the years from a default chronological news feed, in which users see tweets from everyone they follow, as they are published, to an algorithmically curated news feed, which prioritizes more high-engagement tweets and more tweets that are popular within your network (Oremus, 2017).

These features, combined with the close links between Twitter and the American news media, were necessary for Trump to move off the platform and through the media ecosystem to the extent he did. Yet by returning to Reagan, we can see that they were not sufficient. When we think about Reagan's performance as president, we might think of how his lifetime of training as an actor and broadcaster translated to his public performance. Reagan modeled part of this performance, Timothy Raphael (2009) writes, on the way in which Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke over the radio to affect Americans with his voice alone. Roosevelt's radio broadcasts were part of a media image that did not include his physical disability; this was combined with a tacit agreement with the press to only photograph him from the waist up. Raphael draws on Barthes to argue that "the grain" of Roosevelt's voice, transmitted to homes via radio waves, possessed a singular quality that drew people in. It is this grain that Reagan studied and tried to recreate in his spoken address – successfully, according to Brian Massumi (2002), who praises the timbre of Reagan's "beautifully vibratory voice" as "the one Reagan feature that did, I think, hold positive appeal" (p. 44). Reagan speechwriter Landon Parvin describes it as "'a great instrument' that resonated with *'sincerity, likeability, reassurance'* for the listener" (qtd. in Bates, 2011, p. 14). Like Roosevelt, Reagan led with his voice by restricting media access to him apart from heavily choreographed presidential performances. And like Roosevelt, Reagan understood, perhaps instinctively, how "the technical form of modern media tends to foreground emotion, both in its

concentration on key affective sites such as the face or voice and its magnification of the small details of the body that so often signify emotion" (Thrift, 2004, p. 65).

Much has been made of Trump as a media mogul and master, and for good reason. Trump lived for decades as a public figure and entertainer, most notably playing a caricature of himself on the reality TV show *The Apprentice* (NBC, 2004-2017). As *New Yorker* television critic Emily Nussbaum (2017) has observed, "It's become a wearying, ugly observation, a media truism at once superficial and deep: if 'The Apprentice' didn't get Trump elected, it is surely what made him electable. Over fourteen seasons, the television producer Mark Burnett helped turn the Donald Trump of the late nineties — the disgraced huckster who had trashed Atlantic City; a tabloid pariah to whom no bank would lend — into a titan of industry, nationally admired for being, in his own words, 'the highest-quality brand'" (p. 22). Trump's tenure on *The Apprentice,* his experience hustling himself onto the pages of tabloids, and his stake in big-name beauty pageants like Miss Universe, Miss USA, and Miss Teen USA certainly taught him about the art of a media spectacle from an age when getting "cancelled" was the exception, not the rule. Trump can be described as Reagan was: "a man attuned to the power of communication, [such that] the incessant news cycle became a skillfully wielded tool, a continuous loop that repeated his messages and increased his exposure" (Bates, 2011, p. 9).

Yet such accounts risk turning these presidents into all-powerful communicators, whose media mastery was the key to their success. In both cases, however, their media training did not imply perfection. As Brian Massumi (2002) writes about Reagan, the Great Communicator,

> It wasn't that people didn't hear his verbal fumbling or recognize the incoherence of his thoughts. They were the butt of constant jokes and news stories. And it wasn't that what he lacked on the level of verbal coherence was glossed over by the seductive fluency of

his body image. Reagan was more famous for his polyps than his poise, and there was a

collective fascination with his faltering health and regular shedding of bits and pieces of

himself. The only conclusion is that Reagan was an effective leader not in spite of but

because of his double dysfunction. He was able to produce ideological effects by non-

ideological means, a global shift in the political direction of the United States by falling

apart. His means were affective. (p. 43)

By Massumi's account, it was the "incipience" of Reagan's stop-and-start speaking, his "verbal

fumbling" and "the incoherence of his thoughts" (p. 43), offered a kind of "vitality, virtuality,

tendency" that could be transmitted to the American people (p. 45). Joan Copjec (1995) also

directs our attention to Reagan's "lies and errors — his referential failures" (p. 143) as part of the

reason for the public's devotion to him: "Americans love their masters not simply in spite of

their frailties but because of them" (p. 149).[38]

The kind of dysfunction Massumi identifies in Reagan also characterizes Trump's

rambling, seemingly improvisational speaking style (Montgomery, 2017), and can be read into

his tweets. Typos and other errors are common, with the most notable, "covfefe," setting off a

media firestorm. At other times, Trump's errors seemed to tweet policy into being. On July 26,

2017, Trump put out a series of tweets stating that transgender people were barred from military

service:

After consultation with my Generals and military experts, please be advised that the

United States Government will not accept or allow......

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[38] Trump is referenced, somewhat prophetically, in Joan Copjec's chapter on Reagan. A particular instance of the media frenzy over Trump, in which TV crews flocked to the spot he had quarreled with Ivana, is an example of the same "imbecilic devotion to the referent that made the television news the dupes in their battle with Reagan." Copjec, 1995, p. 143.

....Transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the U.S. Military. Our military must be focused on decisive and overwhelming.....

....victory and cannot be burdened with the tremendous medical costs and disruption that transgender in the military would entail. Thank you.[39]

Although he professed to have consulted with experts, Pentagon officials were apparently perplexed (Holtzman, 2020). Nevertheless, as a result of the media coverage and public pressure from the tweets, Trump's off-the-cuff remarks would result in the policy being introduced, a show of political power that is rare from a president.

Other posts are not necessarily errors, though they do make for equally puzzling displays. Consider election day, 2020, when Trump posted a video montage of him dancing to the Village People song "YMCA" at the end of campaign rallies. The video goes on for over a minute, as Trump stands mostly still, occasionally jerkily pumping his fists and wiggling his fingers to the song. On Fox News, Tucker Carlson called it "perhaps the most important video we've seen in quite some time" (qtd. in Nolan, 2020). On the platform alone it was viewed over 10 million times the day it was posted. Already, Trump's dancing — if you can call it that — had been covered by news outlets and parodied on TikTok and The Late Show with Stephen Colbert (AP, 2020). In choosing it as his last word, Trump was acknowledging his bizarre appeal, the media saturation he achieved through a compelling and consistent but ultimately very odd performance.

If Trump works on a larger political and more personal affective level as a capacious, contradictory figure, then how does he work within media systems? Certainly Trump has benefited from a moment of affinity between older conservative media logics and contemporary online posting styles. Yet as with Massumi's Reagan, it seems to be Trump's strange gestures, his unique, idiosyncratic "polyps," that lie at the heart of why he became a "collective

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[39] July 26, 2017. Each tweet received over 100 thousand likes.

fascination." We can think of these mistakes, like Trump's insults, as part of what makes him good at being a media figure: entertaining and eventful enough to provoke engagement, again and again. Ultimately, the above examples matter to the extent that they are not one-offs, but merely select examples in a flood of viral moments, rehashed endlessly across platforms and in the news.

Tweets are ephemeral media: they are often situational, responding to the discourse of the day. Even if users choose not to order their feeds in chronological order, tweets older than a day or two are nevertheless buried by the algorithm, largely forgotten and only visible with new engagement. Despite the ephemerality of its missives, Twitter as a medium can feel all-encompassing. Part of this is due to the design features that, by offering small dopamine hits, keep users following a trail of digital breadcrumbs back to the app.[40] For some users, at least, it seems to be more than that: they have described a sense that, if they were to stop using the app, they would lose access not only to an interactive social platform, but to what was really going on.

As Nilay Patel (2022) writes in light of Elon Musk's purchase of the platform, "[Twitter's] asset is the user base: hopelessly addicted politicians, reporters, celebrities, and other people who should know better but keep posting anyway" (n.p.). Because of the close relationship with media outlets and journalists, there is some reason to believe it is where the news happens; after all, you do not need to use Twitter to be caught in mediatic hold. Believing that the waves of discourse that wash over the app represent currents in the social world writ large is foolish. However, it is a genre of foolishness that many journalists, commentators, and other influential figures have fallen prey to. Especially for the North American media elite but

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[40] These include "pull to refresh" and notification icons and sounds for likes and retweets.

also for the millions of people they influence, Twitter catches people up in a sense of political possibility and atmospheric affect.

For Trump to so consistently be the "main character" on Twitter during the period leading up to and then the four years following his presidency worked in tandem with his political moves to ensure that he was always in the conversation. The success of Trump's Twitter shows how everyday experiences with politics are not punctured or defined by events so much as constantly inundated by them, such that the event in itself hardly exists — and when a figure can capitalize on this, their symbolic and affective presence can feel inescapable. Reagan, whose presidency began alongside the 24-hour news cycle, in many ways wrote the playbook for Trump's mediatic hold. As Copjec (1995) writes, "Television news, … by pointing out the errors in Reagan's statements was not, as we originally assumed, simply attempting to discredit the president. Rather, by discrediting him, it sought to sustain our appeals to him" (p. 150).

The result was atmospheric: Kathleen Stewart (2011) recalls, "I was living in the coal mining camps in West Virginia when Reagan was elected. Right away everyone knew that something was happening, that we were *in* something" (p. 447). Reagan was atmospheric at a time when the 24-hour news cycle was just being born; nevertheless, writes Bates (2011), Reagan, though "not the originator of all the national changes that occurred during the 1980s … is such an important component of collective memory that when many Americans think of this period they cannot do so without understanding it from the point of view of Reagan's influence" (p. 10). Now, amidst a rising number and speed of environmental mediations, ambience multiplies, proliferates. Although tweets can be created or taken up, questioned or provoked, ignored or merely overlooked, an ambient *shaping of the event* is epiphenomenal, often operating on a level above what is being said. This atmospheric politics holds us within a realm of political

and affective possibility, making us "feel bound … even if the manifest content of the binding has the negative force of cynicism of the dark attenuation of political depression" (Berlant, 2011, p. 227), two affects not unknown to Twitter users. For Trump supporters, however, his atmospheric hold on the American political consciousness was a source of great comfort and joy.

American conservatives have often preferred to consume media and participate in political discourse from the comfort of "safe spaces" that decrease the anxieties and increase the comforts of political talk (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). On *Know Your Enemy,* Hemmer describes how Rush Limbaugh achieved that on a widely available radio program through the dense field of references he created, including political nicknames. The common lore granted a sense of community for insiders and a barrier to entry for outsiders, even as Limbaugh became a conservative media giant. Trump's seemingly uninhibited persona allowed for a further extension of those intimate comforts into the public sphere; not for nothing did he intersperse MAGA tweets with the variation, "MAKE AMERICA GREAT AND SAFE AGAIN." This safety against past fears of political judgment is evinced by supporters like Malcolm McGough, who told reporters that Trump "has almost given a freedom, a sense of freedom to finally be able to come out and speak" (Campbell, 2016, p. 20).

In light of the chaotic, disempowering sense that politics takes today, we can think of safety not only in terms of giving license to a certain kind of action or speech. Investment in a figure like Trump is akin to buying safe passage through uncertain political waters. If this comparison seems like a stretch, recall how Trump stayed a coherent figure through contradiction. As his mediations moved across platforms, making the news again and again until they felt atmospheric, investing in Trump as a figure offered a sense of the political that overlapped with your own proxy. The sense of safety and control Trump evoked cannot be

separated, thus, from the larger media as well as political and affective logics upon which it played.

Conclusion

In her prescient novel about Twitter, *No One Is Talking About This,* Patricia Lockwood describes the quest for political authenticity with reference to one of Mitt Romney's funniest political blunders:

> Our politicians had never been so authentic. So linked, arm in arm, with the common people. "My favorite meat is hot dog, by the way," one told us. "That is my favorite meat. My second favorite meat is hamburger. And everyone says, oh, don't you prefer steak. It's like, I know steaks are great, but I like hot dog best, and I like hamburger next best." And we shivered with recognition, and a vague vote grew solid in our hands, for we too liked hot dog best, and hamburger next best. We were the common people, on whom it all rested, and we lived in diners, and we went to church at the gas station, and our mother was a dirty mattress in the front yard, and we liked, God damn it, *hot dog best*.

Lockwood's quote is a strange one. Romney was lambasted, absolutely torn to shreds, for his comments that day; it was not a winning remark by any stretch of the imagination. It is no surprise that Romney failed to convince the public with his half-hearted imitation of a red-blooded American. What is surprising is that Trump did, with tweets like, "The Coca Cola company is not happy with me--that's okay, I'll still keep drinking that garbage."[41] Part of the difference lies in the fact that, despite both being wealthy men, Trump is known for his lowbrow tastes, not only favouring the kind of tacky displays of riches that old money frowns upon but

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[41] October 16, 2012. 55 thousand likes.

making his love for coke and McDonald's widely known. With this remark, he also shows himself to be in on the joke instead of the butt of it. Yet this kind of authenticity — *he's rich but he's still like us* — is only one of the forms that lent Trump his viral success.

The humour, inversion, and contradiction present in lines like, "we went to church at the gas station, and our mother was a dirty mattress in the front yard," were all a constitutive part of Trump's appeal. Trump used this to communicate authenticity both on a platform and affective level. On Twitter, he gained visibility due to the convergence of features in populist conservative communication styles and what can be loosely termed trolling logics. On a larger political level, to "tell it like it is" is to speak an inchoate affect, and Trump held a kind of affective authenticity not for the truth of what he said but for the enjoyment of what he allowed supporters to feel, and feel through. These features were not static, as Trump moved through the media ecosystem, his ambient presence in the news of the day granting him a kind of atmospheric hold in Americans' lives. When it feels like someone is omnipresent and larger than life, it becomes almost impossible to imagine life without them. This power in the hands of a populist leader becomes an especially dangerous, dynamic force, standing in for something people cannot express and yet becoming the ground for political action, identification, and affect.

Trump's tweets were so sticky, so omnipresent, that it didn't feel like they could go away so easily. Yet they did. After Joe Biden was elected, many Americans expressed relief: to them, the Trump years were a bad dream that was finally ending (Gopnik, 2021). A common refrain — on Twitter, of course — was that Americans would finally be free of the kind of constant, frenzied attention to politics they once had. Yet what some Americans experienced as affective exhaustion, a sort of waking nightmare, was for others an awakening. The intimate and

atmospheric pleasures that came from identifying with a figure like Trump will not soon be forgotten, by followers and imitators alike.

Certainly they were part of why Elon Musk was not content with posting on Twitter, but had to buy it; why he was not content with buying Twitter, but had to negotiate and investigate and litigate before the deal closed. If Trump was part of a tradition of American presidents who wished for a kind of "ambient noise" of political communication, an affective messaging that evades the "filter [that] separates out noise from communication" (Berlant, 2011, p. 224) and the leader from the people, there is much to be learned from his example. In the wake of the Twitter purchase, users and commentators alike have taken joy in the constant ribbing Musk has received. An article by Nilay Patel (2022) received lots of attention for its now-you're-in-for-it tone, and though I understand why, I think we should be cautious in finding satisfaction in the fact that Musk is "now the King of Twitter, and people think that [he], personally, [is] responsible for everything that happens on Twitter now" (n.p.). It looks like Twitter will fall apart in a show of petulance and vengeance; before it does, though, Elon Musk will have been the main character, day after day. After all, why avoid the filter if you can flood it, or harness it, or just generally make it work in your favour?

CHAPTER TWO: EVO GRAFFITI AND AMBIENT POPULISM

Given the success Donald Trump has had in becoming an atmospheric figure in American politics, that others on the right could use the same media and populist logics to emulate him is a frightening thought. It is thus not idle hope that leads scholars like Ernesto Laclau (2005) and Chantal Mouffe (2018) to put stock in a left populism as a form of democratic renewal; it is a well-founded belief that the current form of neoliberal democracy is ill-equipped to withstand the wave of right-wing populism currently on the ascendant. Yet the model of left populism that Mouffe and Laclau espouse, centred as it is on the interlinking of popular demands, at times downplays the risks of leaning on not just collective action but empty signifying for the cohering efforts of political solidarity. There are certainly new possibilities inherent to a politics held together by the persona of the populist leader: he can form the ground on which to perform a kind of symbolic politics, allowing people to stake out positions and forge new paths. As we have seen with Trump, however, the emptiness of the populist persona does not render it a vessel, adrift without command, but one with the power to steer itself and all who board it. Recreating the pleasures needed for a kind of Trumpian populism would leave the left vulnerable to its effects and affects.

The scholarship around left populist performance (e.g., Marino, 2018) illustrates a different but interlinked concern. As the spectacular symbolic displays of the leader are aided, negotiated, and repurposed by members of populist publics and counterpublics, they are meaningful not just in terms of one-off engagements. Taken together, they help define the contours of the symbolic field in which politics is articulated. Put simply, the persona of the populist leader may offer pleasure, but he also imposes constraint. Yet these spectacular

performances often overshadow the more banal mediations of the leader, which serve an equally important function, both drawing people into engagements with the populist persona and naturalizing its role in tying together political events and affects.

In the previous chapter, I argued that framing Trump's tweets as ambient media allows us to see how their movement across the American media system helped them and him become atmospheric. Identifying with a figure that has such atmospheric hold can be empowering in its simulation of affective control. While these identifications can also create community and lead people to action, this action is caught up in a larger atmosphere that can seem at once inaccessible and inevitable. The sense of constraint that accompanies the empowerment of identifying with the populist leader is the focus of this chapter. Building on my analysis of Trump's tweets, I investigate how the ambient media of populism takes form in Bolivia, where popular politics and collective mobilization are not the exception but the norm. That is not to say Bolivia is free of neoliberal economic and social policy; as scholars like Nicole Fabricant and Jeffrey R. Webber argue, even the avowedly socialist president Evo Morales could not fully undo the legacy of the structural adjustment programs that swept the region. Instead, individualizing and collectivizing political impulses exist in tension, a tension that becomes clear by attending to both the performative displays and ambient media of Bolivian populism.

In this chapter, I argue that graffiti, in the form of political sloganeering about former Bolivian president Evo Morales, is a form of ambient media. Even though it lacks the affordances of new media like Twitter, the graffiti, in its ephemerality, forms over time a political palimpsest (Trumper, 2016) whose persistence across space and time in the city can make it — and in turn, Morales as its subject — feel atmospheric. This is not to present Bolivian politics as if it takes place through purely offline, in-the-streets manifestations; although Bolivian

cellphone use is certainly lower than in the US, it is growing, and political discourse routinely takes place over platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook. Furthermore, just as Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) outlines in Egypt, in Bolivia the boundaries of online and offline are porous, and popular mobilizations can similarly be advertised, organized, and documented over social media. With this focus on graffiti, I am trying to expand Chapter One's introduction of ambient media to frame populism; even made manifest in a different form, with its own temporality and spatialization, this political graffiti similarly shows how the environment can become an important site of affective attunement, where notions of our roles as political subjects and our belonging in political communities are sedimented. The graffiti's persistence and reappearance over time illustrates what it meant for Morales to have not just an institutional but atmospheric hold over Bolivian politics for more than a decade.

As much as ambient media help to hold people within a political moment or affective atmosphere, I am not saying that they impose "a state of hegemony over viewers," as Anna McCarthy's (2004, p. 188) writing on waiting-room television cautions against. Just as she seeks to counteract "Orwellian imaginings of the public TV screen as a technology of control that standardizes places and subjects" (Ibid.) to the exclusion of site specificity and difference, I must stress that not all ambient media operate in the same way, or mediate all-encompassing or uniform subjectivities and desires. Their presence does not turn the atmosphere into an inaccessible site of personalistic control, but it can lend people and institutions the sense of inaccessibility or inevitability, hiding their contingent nature through atmospheric affects. In a place with such a robust tradition of popular mobilization, it is easy to overlook this ambient register of populism. Yet I argue that it is an equally important site of affective attunement and

identification as the crowd, and any reluctance to view it as such masks the constraints and conditions it places on the potential for collective action.

The TIPNIS conflict and coalitional politics

In the early 2010s, Bolivia became the site of contention over a much older political question: what happens when you've staked your politics on a figure who betrays your interests and your trust? This came to a head in a conflict surrounding the Isiboro Sécure National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS), an Indigenous territory and natural reserve of immense symbolic importance in Bolivia. Its protected status as the country's first native community land was the result of a large-scale mobilization of the lowlands Indigenous peoples in 1990 (Sanchez-Lopez, 2015). Twenty years later, the territory was under threat from a proposed highway that would cut the park in half. In 2011, the TIPNIS controversy boiled over, marring Morales's image as an Indigenous and environmental champion. The TIPNIS conflict has exposed the contradictions in Morales's discourse and policy about the environment, Indigeneity, and the structures of power and the economy. But it also laid bare the dangers in adopting the kind of left populism that Laclau and Mouffe describe: once your movement is anchored to a unifying figure, who makes your movement more than just the sum of its parts, it can be led in a direction that betrays part of the coalition — overcoming contradiction is not always effective or cleanly done. This conflict was a major blow to Morales's reputation and provoked a crisis of legitimacy, so this is not to downplay its significance. Yet as the TIPNIS conflict was recast as "creative tensions,"[42] dissenters found themselves caught in a prefigured web of political choice and symbolic meaning, limiting their room to manoeuvre.

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[42] In former Vice President Alvaro García Linera's (2011) *Las tensiones creativas de la revolución* (The creation tensions of the revolution), he argues that the Cochabamba Water War saw the formation and mobilization of a historic bloc that bridged rural and urban divides, and these actions dealt a blow from which the ruling powers could

The conflict began in 2010, when the Morales administration began constructing a highway that ran from the Chapare region of Bolivia to Brazil (Sanchez-Lopez, 2015), right through the heart of TIPNIS. The government started building without consulting the Indigenous groups living in the park, in direct contravention of the constitution they had put in place the year before. The Bolivian government argued that the road would favourably connect eastern and western Bolivia, integrate isolated Indigenous communities with the rest of the country, and facilitate trade and economic development, increasing the wellbeing of all (Ibid.). However, they also named the park's rich natural resources as a secondary rationale for opening it up to development and proposed exploiting the hydrocarbon reserves in TIPNIS (Webber, 2014). It is thus exemplary of the vision of Andean-Amazonian capitalism espoused by former Vice President Alvaro García Linera,[43] as another massive extractive project the MAS government has pursued in the name of redistributive policies. Arguing for the continued exploitation of TIPNIS, García Linera said, "We are not going to turn ourselves into park rangers for the powers of the North who live happily, while we continue in poverty" (qtd. in Postero, 2017, p. 98).[44]

Threatened by the lack of consultation, the TIPNIS communities rallied together to fight back. In August of 2011, between 500 and 700 members of the Yuracaré, Moxeño, and T´simane nations left the lowlands on a march to La Paz to oppose the highway, with numbers growing steadily as they allied with the Indigenous Confederation of Bolivia (CIDOB) (Webber, 2014;

never fully recover. Although these conflicts were unable to oust the ruling party, they ruptured the political equilibrium, ultimately resulting in the election of Morales and the rise of MAS. When he turns to MAS's project in its current state, he acknowledges the tensions in its project but argues that they are "creative" rather than divisive.

[43] García Linera's contentious *Geopolitica de la Amazonia* justified the government's extractivist politics — and by extension, their refusal of Indigenous autonomy in TIPNIS — by arguing for the necessity of Andean-Amazonian capitalism based on natural-resource rents.

[44] This is common rhetoric for left populist presidents when challenged by Indigenous groups. Former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, when Indigenous groups protested his overly permissive mining legislation, "called those who opposed his mining law 'childish,' 'nobodies,' and 'allies of the right.' He continued with: 'It is absurd that some want to force us to remain like beggars sitting on top of a bag of gold'" (Fabricant, 2012, p. 22). This discourse was formalized into policy in May 2015, when a supreme decree allowed the exploitation of natural resources in protected areas (Hope, 2016).

Sanchez-Lopez, 2015). On September 25, the conflict reached a breaking point when the marchers were met with brutal police violence and repression upon entering Chaparina. The images circulated by opposition media garnered a wave of public sympathy for the marchers, culminating in shows of solidarity from the public, including strikes organized by the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB), Bolivia's main union, in cities across the country. The result was a severe blow to the government's credibility in the conflict, and two government ministers were forced to resign (Hirsch, 2019). By the time they reached La Paz on October 19, the marchers were 2,500 strong, and were greeted with overwhelming support from residents (Sanchez-Lopez, 2015). The president was forced to meet with the marchers, and passed Law 180, which declared the "intangibility" of TIPNIS. With the TIPNIS conflict, the contradictions of the MAS government were keenly felt by activists, intellectuals, and citizens. The Unity Pact, an alliance of major grassroots workers' and Indigenous organizations in support of MAS, was essentially ended because of the TIPNIS conflict: by November 2011, it went from eleven organizations to just three (Webber, 2014).

This conflict echoes the tensions inherent in Evo's political project. When he entered politics, it was first as leader of his local *sindicato*, and then of all the sindicatos in the Tropic of Cochabamba.[45] Eventually, he and other *cocalero* (coca grower) leaders took control of the almost-defunct Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) party, portraying MAS not as a traditional party but, to quote Morales, as "the political instrument of the social movements" that mobilized in vast numbers during the "Social Wars" of the early 2000s (qtd. in Harten, 2011, p. 82).[46] The Social Wars had no leader, but he successfully positioned himself as the one to keep the alliances

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[45] The sindicatos are a form of social organization for the often-Indigenous communities, mostly but not only cocaleros, that migrated from the highlands to the lowlands. This migration first started in the 1970s and steadily increased with the crushing of the miners' unions under neoliberal governments. Harten, 2011.

[46] In Bolivia in the early 2000s, neoliberal and dictatorial control had hollowed out the state's capacity to protect positive liberties, resulting in mass mobilizations over public access to water and gas.

between disparate social movements intact once the immediate crises were over. Once elected president in 2006, Morales used the rhetoric of *mandar obedeciendo*, or ruling obediently, to frame MAS's relation to Bolivians. In this rhetoric, the state is less a policing or regulatory body than an extension of the people, whose definition changed to revolve around a medley of subaltern identities.

Evo was thus a straightforward "empty signifier" in his ability to articulate an ongoing solidarity between a people that had come together in protest: his persona allowed the disparate social demands that had come together in the Social Wars to continue as a meaningful political movement. At the most basic level, you could say Evo entered formal politics to spearhead a larger effort toward the devolution of political power. In fact, MAS is a short form of MAS-IPSP: Movimiento al Socialismo–Instrumento Político por la Soberanía de los Pueblos (*Movement Toward Socialism–Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples*). Some of the political-institutional changes Evo has enacted have encouraged such popular sovereignty. He vastly increased taxes on, and thus rents from, foreign gas companies; he promoted the cultivation of coca, to the benefit of mostly Indigenous producers; he used natural-resource wealth to finance community-oriented programs, from literacy initiatives to cash transfers. In the process, his government helped to include Indigenous people in the political process and to empower the rural population in South America's poorest country, which has improved on almost all social indicators. In return, Morales has relied heavily on grassroots mobilization, and has used several plebiscites to legislate changes and consolidate authority.

The use of Indigenous symbolism and discourse was crucial to this political program. Bolivians overwhelmingly identify as Indigenous and/or *mestizo* (mixed), but the culture of those in power has rarely reflected this. Morales was different: as an Aymara, one of the two dominant

Indigenous groups in the country, he placed Indigenous discourse as a central pillar of his government, and especially in the 2009 constitution that recast the state as "plurinational," which emphasized the diverse Indigenous groups that make up the larger Bolivian state. Although the minor devolution of administrative powers in that constitution has given MAS a reputation of under-delivering on promises of Indigenous autonomy (Fabricant & Postero, 2019), the progress in rhetoric alone is substantial. Evo — his body, his voice, and his persona — took centre stage through it all. As Nicole Fabricant and Nancy Postero (2013) observe, "Every significant transformative moment in the first few years of his administration — the new Agrarian Reform Law, or the nationalization of gas, or even the inauguration of the Constituent Assembly — was marked by some kind of spectacular and performative event through which Morales relied upon historic memory, space/place, the body, and indigeneity to undo the colonial legacy" (p. 192).

Many of Evo's symbolic displays would pull almost exclusively from iconography and practices of the Andean (highland) Indigenous groups, especially the Aymara. Morales' championing of Aymara symbolism has afforded Bolivians a new terrain upon which to articulate the break with the colonial Christian tradition that still has its grip on the more conservative power brokers in the country. It has also shown the inconsistency of Morales' commitment to the "plurinationalism" of the 2009 constitution — even the choice to inaugurate the new constitution at Tiwanaku, a sacred Aymara site, was Morales choosing to "refound" the country as plurinational with his own highland nation at the core (Ibid.). TIPNIS was another point of tension between Evo's links to his highland cocalero allies and the larger political movement he stood for.[47]

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[47] Opponents of the highway stated that it would open up the park to increased deforestation through coca growing and natural-resource extraction (Canessa, 2016; Sanchez-Lopez, 2015). Others have noted that the road will allow for Bolivia-Brazil and inter-Bolivia trade without passing through opposition-held Santa Cruz, and that the road connects El Chapare, Bolivia's primary coca-growing region, with a large foreign market (Canessa, 2016).

Participating in such politics with the hope of material benefit involves trade-offs that are only sometimes compensated, as was the case at the controversial mass Aymara wedding. Once again at Tiwanaku, Morales officiated a wedding of more than 350 couples, labelling the ceremony as an ancestral Aymara tradition and the beginning of "a radical process of depatriarchalisation of the colonial, liberal and neoliberal family" (qtd. in Canessa, 2014, p. 158). Yet by taking on the role of "indigenous godfather of the nation" (Canessa, 2014, p. 158), Morales showed a desire to institute a patriarchal guidance of a different form. Nicole Postero (2017) argues that the ceremony was not only an 'invented tradition' but a sanitization of historical Aymara marriage practices, ultimately "foreclosing disagreements about the meaning of indigeneity and who is entitled to represent it" (p. 65). The couples she interviews were well aware that the ceremony was a show; what was disappointing to many was instead that their promised recompense of government housing had still not been provided. Couples were still caught up in advocating for these gifts from the state; in the meantime, their public service had invested it with a new sacrality. In both symbolic and material terms, Evo became the mediating figure, rerouting both tradition and material benefits like housing through his persona.

Evo was taken up, even by his critics, as this mediating figure; we can see this in much of the pushback to TIPNIS through popular graffiti, which offered a direct challenge to Evo as the man responsible for the highway. Lucia Mulherin Palmer (2017) documents some of this graffiti in her fieldwork in Cochabamba. One, "a commonly found stencil" (p. 3668) of the word "Evo" cutting in half a tree with hearts for leaves, accompanied by skull and crossbones, positions Morales at the heart of the TIPNIS conflict: it is not MAS but Evo who is bulldozing the forest. Public anger at Evo takes a less issue-based, more direct form in the spraypainted scrawl, "EVO HIJO DE PUTA" (*Evo son of a bitch)* that Palmer (2017) also documents on the walls of

Cochabamba. The messages are affecting in different ways: the former's use of colour and symbolism gives it a live quality, while the latter's aggressive condemnation situates opposition to the president in place, its anger and disdain unmistakable and present until covered over.

As Camilo Trumper (2016) writes of graffiti in Allende's Chile, we can frame TIPNIS graffiti as not just an ephemeral intervention in the urban environment but a political intervention, one part of a mass mobilization that redrew the lines of political solidarity and revitalized a culture of public protest. Taking inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, Palmer (2017) highlights the potential for Bolivian street artists to create "nomadic" art that "subverts the sedimented, hierarchical grids of the planned city … Cochabambino graffiti smooths space, opens new potentialities for movement, and imagines fields of inclusivity" (p. 3656). She finds much of the graffiti in the Bolivian city of Cochabamba subversive both in its messaging and the way it forges new paths throughout the city, repurposing features of building and streets for unexpected ends.

Although this graffiti emerged from the margins to draw people into new engagements with the cityscape and their movement, which does imply a certain nomadic quality, casting it in this light falls prey to what Ella Chmielewska (2007) describes as "the widespread attraction to the subversive aura of graffiti and its radical aesthetics," which acts as "an impediment to critical examination of the phenomenon" (p. 149). This graffiti's targeting of Morales was understandable, and the message was clear: Evo's ability to overcome the contradiction inherent to being "the political instrument of the social movements" was in question. As much as this upset the ordering of urban and political life, it nevertheless reinforced the terms upon which these dominant narratives were built, though not their character. Evo set the guidelines for political discourse and action, the arena in which struggle occurs. His agency was never in doubt;

in fact, it was constantly reinforced by the very writing on the wall that sought to challenge the TIPNIS project.

This is in many ways a predictable bind — the broader resonance and political impact of such graffiti is dependent on the public to which it speaks, after all — but not a totalizing one. In 2010, when community groups began to graffiti environmentalist messages in La Paz, El Alto, and Cochabamba, "one *Insurgencia Comunitaria* activist recalls, 'since there was no news on the matter, the issue was forgotten and the graffiti, with time, disappeared'" (Ryan, 2017, p. 89). When graffiti was salient, it made use of popular discourse around the masista political project, pointing out inconsistencies and hypocrisies in the new ethic guiding the nation. Yet this was possible without bolstering Evo's importance. Holly Eva Ryan's (2017) account shows how graffiti artists managed this tension in relation to TIPNIS, using site-specific tactics as well as broadly relatable symbols to foster public awareness and engagement. With the mass mobilizations of June 2011, painting in urban public spaces where solidarity protests occurred became a way to engage city-dwellers and attract the attention of photographers, who would document and share the protest *pintadas* (Ibid.). This is a nod to social media's growing importance in Bolivian politics as well as the historical linkages between political art and the news media in Latin America (see Chaffee, 1993).

Some of this graffiti positioned the highway as a capitalist project and a threat to mother earth, recalling the discursive tools underlying the MAS government's hegemony and pointing out the betrayal constituted by the TIPNIS highway. This symbolic contestation made use of the Wiphala, one of the most prominent symbols of the new Bolivia. MAS introduced the Aymara flag, or the Wiphala, as the second flag of Bolivia in 2009. This is representative of Evo's general approach: take some piece of iconography or ritual from his own people and give it

symbolic importance for plurinational Bolivia's imagined Indigenous subject. Ryan (2017) describes how the *Insurgencia Comunitaria* collective staged a metaphoric coup for the Wiphala: when the TIPNIS marchers were about to reach La Paz, street artists stenciled animals into the ground that the marchers would walk over when they entered the city, with an accompanying *pintada* in the Plaza Bicentenario. Instead of relying on the figure of Evo, they reclaimed the symbolism in the Wiphala by taking it apart and redirecting its every colour. By painting with the colours of the Wiphala, artists took the heart of Morales's plurinational project and placed it firmly with the life occupying TIPNIS, and the movement that sought to protect it. This site- and time-specific intervention proved too direct a challenge to authorities, who cleaned it up before the marchers could see it.

Graffiti is both a medium for expressing dissent and a reconfiguration of the dominant motifs of the nation. To exist within a political moment means that you will most likely navigate it with whatever tools you have on hand, tools that may tie you to the bulwarks of symbolic power. Yet how long a moment lasts, and how permanent it feels, are not separate from how the people characterize and respond to it. The TIPNIS conflict did not end in 2011: the law declaring the park's "intangibility" was merely the beginning of a back-and-forth series of marches and countermarches, consultations and condemnations, that would take place over the next several years. As the conflict sprung up again and again during Evo's fourteen-year-long presidency, it became almost recursive, its particular moments coalescing into a larger presence, something always in the wings of politics. What happens when crisis and uncertainty, tied to the figure supposed to hold politics together, radiate across space and persist over time?

Referendum graffiti and ambient subjectivation

When I visited Bolivia in July and August of 2017, the TIPNIS conflict was underway once more, as the highway project had once again received government assent. Segments of the public once again mobilized against the TIPNIS highway, but the people I spoke with in La Paz shared a sense of political inevitability, both about TIPNIS and about Evo in general. Barely two years prior, Morales had sought to amend the 2009 constitution that he had introduced in order to run for a third, or technically a fourth, presidential term. He and legislators put the question to a popular vote, with mandatory participation, and the "no" side won by a narrow margin on February 21, 2016. Ultimately Evo would run again after winning the approval of Bolivia's supreme court. When observers from the Organization of American States cast doubt on the regularity of the 2019 general election vote count, it legitimized the fears of right-wingers who perceived Morales as corrupt and centrists who had never forgiven him for disregarding the institutional checks he himself had put in. Massive street protests led him to ultimately step down, and he was replaced by a provisional government in what was regarded by many on the left as a coup d'état, before this government was ultimately overturned and MAS was voted into power once more, this time under new leadership.

In the time I was there, the results of the referendum had not yet been overturned, but the people I spoke to remained certain that Evo would run nevertheless.[48] While there was TIPNIS graffiti, more visible on city buildings was pro- and anti-Evo political sloganeering. Inside the city and without, the façades of many buildings were adorned with the words "sí" and "no," physical traces of the referendum from the year before. In the roughly two-year period between

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[48] Many of these were my coworkers, workers and volunteers at a policy nonprofit and community garden, who came from different parts of the country but lived in La Paz and were generally educated. Despite the skew of their political interpretations, and the Evo-skepticism of La Paz in general, these conversations were helpful signposts and contextualizations of the larger media discourses and political mobilizations during my time in Bolivia.

the referendum vote and the supreme court approval, Bolivian politics was held in a state of suspension and suspense until Evo's presidential bid was allowed. The atmosphere of political inevitability I observed was echoed by the persistence and durability of referendum graffiti, not only in the neighbourhood in which I worked but in pockets throughout the city and the surrounding countryside. Like other graffiti, this political sloganeering was site-specific and ephemeral, and the many iterations of "si" and "no" I encountered are not easily found. What is found within the public record, however, is some of the graffiti from the presidential election two years before. In early 2015, Google Maps sent their car, equipped with 360-degree camera, to document the "street view" of El Alto and La Paz. Digitally tracing a route years later presents an echo of what I observed in person. These traces, combined with images of the referendum graffiti in Juan Tamayo's *Nuevo Mundo* docu-series, show the persistence of Evo as a political question across time and space.

In the previous chapter, I defined ambient media as the often banal media forms and traces that permeate our immediate environments, mediating affective experiences and political expectations. Although these everyday, environmental media are "perceived largely through indirect attention" (Roquet, 2016, p. 2), our attunements to and engagements with them offer access points through which we can participate in and orient ourselves toward a larger political atmosphere. Dylan Trigg defines atmospheres as "affective phenomena, which are grasped pre-reflectively, manifest spatially, felt corporeally, and conceived as semi-autonomous and indeterminate entities" (Trigg, 2020, p. 1). Atmospheres in this sense envelop individuals (McCormack, 2018) and radiate from individuals, objects and environments (Bohme, 1993). Affective atmospheres are thus characterized by in-betweenness of individuals to one another (Trigg, 2020) and to environments, capturing "the experience of a tense atmosphere in a room,

the oppressive mood before a thunderstorm, or the serene atmosphere of a garden" (Bohme, 2017, p. 20). Affective atmospheres are at once real and not real, present and absent (Dufrenne 1973 [1953], qtd. in Anderson, 2009).

Atmosphere can help explain how the affective power of populism operates over and above any symbolic identification or construction of 'the people.' Dylan Trigg (2020) argues that the atmosphere, as it is made up of the diffusion of many individual affects, becomes an affective ground upon which collectivities are forged; simultaneously, it is assigned value that individuals become attuned to in concert. He highlights the "joint structure of diffusion and attunement" (p. 2) that characterizes atmosphere as a vehicle for shared emotion *en masse*. It is often the mass of the crowd that foregrounds depictions of populist feeling. For instance, in *The Edge of Democracy*, a documentary that follows Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff as a political scandal threatens to unseat her, we see Dilma's supporters watch the vote of non-confidence on a TV in a public square. The collective despair that is palpable as each representative's vote is cast and broadcast, and it becomes clear the opposition has won, is both amplified and crystalized as a feeling in the air that alters people's sense of political belonging.

Focusing on the ambient media of populism shows how symbolic contestations, like the ones made manifest in the TIPNIS graffiti, can come to feel atmospheric. Accordingly, the process by which the populist leader becomes the icon around which all politics coheres does not only take place through larger-than-life performances and appeals to grand mythologies. The persistence and penetration of graffiti as ambient media reroute populism's spectacular symbolism into banal messaging and resituate its discursive events into everyday encounters. In doing so, it makes the leader atmospheric. Even as we think of populism in terms of excessive displays of symbolism or affective mass demonstrations, what makes the graffiti significant as

the ambient media of populism is the way it is at work in the background and the way it puts the background to work.

To consider this political graffiti as a corpus, despite its idiosyncratic instantiations, is not without its problems. Each political slogan I describe was chosen in a different place, perhaps by a different person motivated by their own reasons and writing in their own style. This diversity of motives, as well as the presence of paid professionals alongside informal groups, is described in *Nuevo Mundo* by muralist Leonel Jurado, who tells the film crew, "They are small cells that are formed from… a neighbourhood, let's say. There's a social centre, they hire two painters, or some friends get together, to paint political messages. Here it has become popular culture. I participated in that, I was hired to do that once" (Tamayo, 2020).[49] Similarly, each person who encountered the graffiti I write about did so with their own preconceptions and felt its impact in their own way. I think, however, that it is worthwhile to consider the experience of seeing these same messages repeated throughout the city, and even contributing to this discourse. That means, in the words of Chmielewska (2007), showing how "the ubiquity of its collective form asserts disquieting sameness, normative visual contestation, and the rigid stylistic canon that often overpowers local details" (p. 161). I hope to show that in the case of the political messages I examine, this is not opposed to but in fact dependent upon its site-specific creation.

La Paz is in a valley, with the city built up onto the hillside. At the top on the western side is the city of El Alto, whose working-class, primarily Indigenous residents form a strong base of MAS's support. The area stretching from the central downtown avenues and plazas up the western hillside until El Alto is the microdistrict of Cotahuma, where I lived and worked while I was in the city. Twice a week, I traveled by *microbus* from middle-class Sopocachi, close

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[49] Translated by *Nuevo Mundo* from, "Son pequeñas células que se forman, de… digamos, un barrio. Tienes un centro social, contrata dos pintores, o se juntan entre amigos, a hacer consigna política. Aquí se ha vuelta como cultura popular. Yo participé en eso, me contrataron una vez para hacer eso."

to the Plaza del Estudiante, far up the hillside to almost the very top of Cotahuma. In the area surrounding the Cotahuma *teleférico* station, graffiti favouring Evo Morales adorned the walls along the major streets of Avenida Buenos Aires and Julio Tellez. Retracing the route I normally took to work on Google Street View, twice there was the word Evo alone, twice with a check mark; twice there was Evo with his election term, 2015-2020, and twice the word "*presidente*" is put in the middle. There is a consistency between several of these slogans that suggests coordination, but despite the commonalities between them, there are notable differences even in the same neighbourhood or on the same street. In particular, it was common practice to have a stenciled image of Evo accompanying some of the graffiti. Upon closer inspection, however, the images I found in close proximity were all different.

This graffiti was documented in Cotahuma in 2015, preserved on Google Street View. Each shows a different stenciled Evo with a message to vote. On the right, this has met with contestation ("sin," meaning "without").

Traveling through the upper limits of Cotahuma meant passing through this spatial stronghold of Evo and MAS, an indication of a marginal position between opposition-held La Paz and *masista* El Alto. This political sloganeering was multivalent: it asserted the neighbourhood's marginal character within the broader political allegiances of the city, but this marginality was actually aligned with the party in power nationally. In many ways the graffiti

functioned more similarly to political lawn signs than the TIPNIS graffiti discussed above, much more common as it was on small homes and businesses in the streets above than on the dense, higher-volume commercial streets below. In Cotahuma, where they dominated the built environment, they were present with other messages, but outside of other campaigning, these messages are largely not political.[50] Some graffiti seemed strategically placed beside these messages, such as the one below the "aviso municipal" (*municipal notice*). Others showed traces of past graffiti, most likely painted over when it became irrelevant or out of date. The Evo graffiti was there alongside it, presenting an active call to vote. The word Evo often had a check mark for the V, or a checked box below it. Many instances were also the target of contestation through the form of vandalism, whether through the crossing out of key messages or the word *sin* (without) surrounding Evo in capital letters. The graffiti thus invited both imitation and negation.

When I took this same route in 2017, many of these same spots had either "sí" alone or accompanied by "Evo" to signal support for Morales' ability to run again. Occurring often along the same route what was so dense with support for Evo in 2015, these affirmations and contestations functioned as well alone as they did alongside invocations of Evo; when alone, they nevertheless anchored the referendum to a specific place. I observed the words "sí" and "no" graffitied not just in Cotahuma, but elsewhere in La Paz, in El Alto, and beyond, in both rural and urban areas. By the time I encountered the referendum graffiti in 2017, throughout the many individual changes and contestations, appearances and paintings over, it had persisted as a phenomenon in the built environment long after the vote was over. Its iconic, visible presence struck me as an outsider in a way that my colleagues hardly remarked. For them, it had become a mundane part of their neighbourhoods and environments. If we posit the graffiti as ambient media, however, its unremarkable nature does not make it unimportant. You might also get used

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[50] A common phrase is *ladron pillado sera quemado* (a caught thief will be burned).

to the diesel fumes that suffused the air of the valley that made up La Paz, until seeing them as an inescapable part of life; but go up the high cliffside and you'd feel what it is like to breathe clean air again.
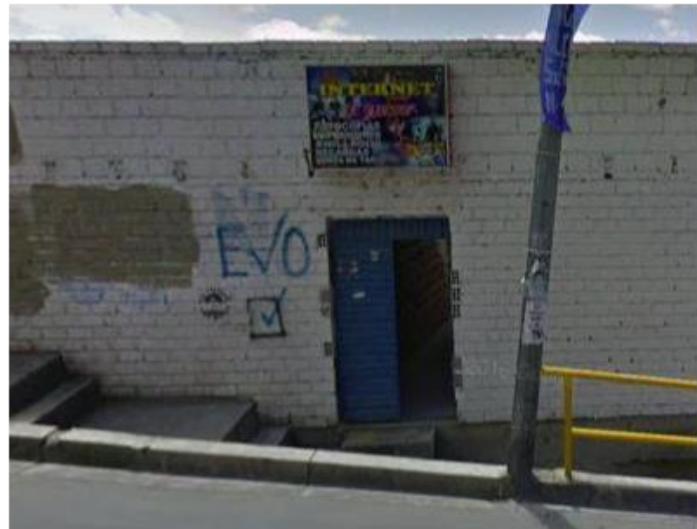
These are both screenshots of Google Street View from Cotahuma, La Paz. On the left, "Evo 2015-2020" has been spray painted below a municipal notice. Someone has added "sin" below. On the right, "Evo" is accompanied by a checked box.

As Lauren Berlant (2011) writes, for most, "politics is something overheard, encountered indirectly and unsystematically, through a kind of communication more akin to gossip than to cultivated rationality" (p. 227). Accordingly, our attachment to politics can be facilitated by an appeal to the ambient, which "provides atmospheres and spaces in which movement happens through persons: listeners dissolve into an ongoing present whose ongoingness is neither necessarily comfortable nor uncomfortable, avant-garde nor Muzak, but, most formally, a space of abeyance" (Berlant, 2011, p. 230). As Kathleen Stewart (2011) writes, "anything can feel like something you're in" (p. 449), but the questions of what we feel we're in and how we feel we're in it remain, and remain political in nature.

Above is a still from *Nuevo Mundo*, taken in El Alto. "Evo sí" is accompanied by the common warning, "ladron pillado sera quemado" (a caught thief will be burned). Tamayo, 2020.

Affective atmospheres can exist over and above immediate collective affects, experienced through "atmospheric attunements" as something in the air, surrounding or enveloping us. With this characterization, Stewart builds on her earlier work on ordinary affects, "public feelings" that are both broad and intimate, and "that catch people up in something that feels like something" (Stewart, 2007, p. 2). Atmospheric attunements are about our relations to these somethings we are caught up in: "forms of attending to what's happening, sensing out, accreting attachments and detachments, differences and indifferences, losses and proliferating possibilities" (Stewart, 2011, p. 448) that make up part of Heideggerian worlding. There is a spatial dimension and a quality of movement that run through Stewart's description. The scene is one of everyday life — she is building, after all, on a work about ordinary affects — but this is one in which political figures and movements move us affectively not through particular acts of symbolism or policy but some overarching sense of containment.

This can present through the dramatic affects like fear and hope that are cited in the literature (e.g., Curato, 2016; Demertzis, 2019). Yet these take place beside what Sianne Ngai refers to as "ambient affects," part of a class of quotidian, small feelings, which she writes "may in fact be better suited to interpreting ongoing states of affairs" (Ngai, 2005, p. 27). "Certainly less narratively structured, in the sense of being less object- or goal-directed," these "intentionally weak and therefore often politically ambiguous feelings" (p. 26) are just as much a part of populism as grand displays of emotion, as the referendum graffiti illustrates. It is worth saying that everyone who encountered this graffiti would do so in their own way, and that no two people's feelings can be equated. Sara Ahmed (2010) reminds us that people never encounter atmospheres *tabula rasa,* as blank slates ready to be moved by them.[51] The atmosphere does not exist as something we can experience this way; instead, our experiences are coloured by the fact that "bodies do not arrive in neutral," but are "always in some way or another moody" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 40). Seeing the words referendum graffiti might fire you up, knowing that it stood for a major constitutional change. However, the persistence of these simple words, "yes" and "no," makes them by nature more amenable to a lower register of emotion.

The ambient media of populism are in some sense similar to the artifacts of what Michael Billig terms "banal nationalism," in which allegiance to the nation is "flagged" throughout our environments in mundane ways. He writes, "The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building" (Billig, 2010 [1995], p. 6). This type of banal populism was present when I

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[51] Ahmed here is critiquing the "outside-in" model of affect that she identifies in Theresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect,* which notably draws on crowd psychology research. Brennan (2004) argues that affect moves between individuals when the "projection or introjection of a judgment" takes place — our judgments of ourselves are thrown onto others or our judgments of others are taken onto ourselves, creating affective atmospheres that can move between people (Brennan, 2004, p. 5). The atmosphere here becomes the vehicle of transmission, such that it "literally gets into the individual" (p. 1). The effect of this "undermines the dichotomy between the individual and the environment" (p. 7) without doing away with the distinction between one and the other completely.

visited in 2017 via massive posters of Evo, some with military slogans and others advertising La Paz's expanding cable-car network. The referendum graffiti also offers the feeling of being held but presents as even more innocuous, lacking the larger-than-life depictions of Evo posters or the excesses of his many symbolic demonstrations. Yet the referendum graffiti goes further, showing that even the most foundational words of yes and no can set the scene for an all-encompassing politics.

In this still from *Nuevo Mundo*, a blue "sí" has been painted onto a white background on an El Alto house overlooking the city of La Paz. Tamayo, 2020.

Just as Trump's tweets moved throughout the American media system to give everyday life the quality of an event, and vice versa, so too did the remains of Evo graffiti stretch large political events into daily encounters. Media can come into being with the sharpness of an event, but ambience has the quality of effacing eventness as it persists over time. This is in effect what Lori Allen (2008) observed in her examination of Palestinian martyr posters during the second intifada. The posters put up to commemorate individual martyrs became environmental, part of

the background, just as the "event" of the intifada shifted into the "everyday." Yet these posters also call people to prayer, showing that their everyday, environmental status does not preclude calls to action and engagement. Similarly, the referendum graffiti sprung up in a short period before the vote, when tensions were high and the question felt existential. As the Google Street View images from Cotahuma and *Nuevo Mundo* stills from El Alto show, however, new graffiti often appeared in spaces that had been home to similar messages in the past. The walls were a kind of political palimpsest, in which the new messages about the referendum coexisted with traces of messages about former political contestations.

This is another still from *Nuevo Mundo*, shot in El Alto. The "n" in a wall-spanning "Evo no" has been covered with "sí." Tamayo, 2020.

Graffiti's significance is often theorized in terms of its ephemerality (Trumper, 2016), but equally important is its persistence. The durability of the spaces I am documenting, in which election messages gave way to referendum ones, is a mirror image of Bolivian street art under dictatorship, in which subversive messages would be painted, whitewashed by the state, and then

reinscribed onto city walls (Ryan, 2019) — only this graffiti was pro-regime. That is not to say that reinscription was without contestation or change. Exploring the streets of El Alto in Google Street View, I found an intersection in which the footage taken suddenly jumped one month ahead. Within that month, new Evo graffiti sprouted up on a building on the corner. To say that the graffiti was persistent or durable is not to deny its sporadic, ephemeral nature. It is merely to shift the emphasis, so that a site of creation and negation is also understood as a point of attunement to the contours of discursive and political possibility.

These contours were not firm, prescribed boundaries, and still invited negotiation on multiple fronts. Contestations were commonplace, as in the photo above, in which the declaration of "Evo no" has been overwritten with a "sí," showing the graffiti's contingency in spite of its appearance of durability on city walls. Sometimes these were more ambiguous. In 2018, James Brunker documented walls painted with the slogan, "Tarija dice.. no" (*Tarija says… no*), in which the letter "o" of the "no" is a winking emoji.[52] In another, it seems the "n" of the "no" was painted over, such that the message from Tarija was nothing but an ambiguous figure and an empty hashtag.[53] City walls present a different canvas than social media sites, but the lines between online and offline engagements can be blurred. What is interesting to me is the way in which this playfulness is both a practice of political speech, making connections and inviting engagement through a reappropriation of common symbols, and yet something that affirms a particular relation to Evo, his centrality in politics, even through its disavowal.

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[52] See: James Brunker, "People walking past 'Tarija says no' political mural on house, Uriondo, Concepcion Valley, Tareja Department, Bolivia," *Magical Andes Photography,* 2018, https://www.magicalandes.com/-/galleries/bolivia/tarija-department/-/medias/57f2ec12-2a76-4e68-ad93-7f84a1ab61bc-people-walking-past-tarija-says-no-political-mural-on-house.

[53] See: James Brunker, "'Tarija says no' political mural on half built house, Uriondo, Concepcion Valley, Tareja Department, Bolivia," *Magical Andes Photography,* 2018, https://www.magicalandes.com/-/galleries/bolivia/tarija-department/-/medias/bc2c1aef-eb6f-4f0e-abe0-68962bea19a8-tarija-says-no-political-mural-on-half-built-house-uriondo

Neoliberal populism and collective action

The implications of this ambient affect on theorizations of populism go beyond breaking down oppositions. While not always apparent as we experience them, these recurring, ambient encounters can colour our understanding, not only of the community we inhabit but our place within it. Ben Anderson writes that affective atmospheres "are a class of experience that occur before and alongside the formation of subjectivity … atmospheres are the shared ground from which subjective states and their attendant feelings and emotions emerge" (Anderson, 2009, p. 78). Paul Roquet (2016) points to this mediating role to put forth a theory of "ambient subjectivation" (p. 4). Here Roquet is drawing on Foucault's claim that liberal and neoliberal governments do not merely rely on "techniques of domination" to create compliant subjects, but also "techniques of the self," individuals' conduct qua political subjects (Burchell, 1996). Although "there is no simple determination of techniques of the self … by techniques of domination" (p. 21), Graham Burchell writes that "liberalism, particularly in its modern versions, constructs a relationship between government and the governed that increasingly depends upon ways in which individuals are required to assume the status of being the subjects of their lives, upon the ways in which they fashion themselves as certain kinds of subjects, upon the ways in which they practise their freedom" (pp. 29-30).

Roquet's "emergence of self with and through ambient media" (Roquet, 2016, p. 4) focuses on how individuals' consumption of media produced to evoke a kind of ambient calm individualizes them as political subjects and provides the illusion of becoming one with a pre- or apolitical totality. As we listen to environmental music to self-regulate, for instance, we are producing more docile, compliant citizens; we are moderating our public comportment as well as our emotions. Roquet argues that the Foucauldian techniques that ambient media facilitate are in

turn made possible by the illusion of merging with the atmosphere that ambient media makes possible. For Roquet, "The fantasy of a totally autonomous self and the fantasy of merging with the atmosphere are both essential to neoliberal biopolitics, working to obscure the everyday back-and-forth of ambient subjectivation" (p. 15). I think the concept of ambient subjectivation holds value here, though it was developed for media specifically produced to be ambient. For media that *become* ambient, the concept's relevance becomes clear as we look at how they do, and what that provokes from the people who produce and respond to them.

When individuals and groups created graffiti about Evo Morales, what was their objective? In the case of TIPNIS, it was to expose the contradictions contained in his persona. This was a direct attack, a project of consciousness raising. The referendum graffiti, and the election graffiti it built upon, was a call to vote, also meant to change minds. Yet what is the worth of a call to vote in a plebiscite that will be overturned when the results returned are not the ones desired? It is a call to participate in an institutional process that has been put in place, and will later be neutralized, by and for the man in power. The referendum graffiti signaled individual political allegiances — with a larger collectivity, yes, but more potently with neoliberal political institutions via the act of voting. Both in its original creation and in its atmospheric effects and affects, this graffiti stood for and helped sustain an attachment to neoliberal politics by promising choice when there was none.

Berlant (2011) shows how our attachments to the dominant performances of neoliberal politics can be a type of cruel optimism. The safe haven of affective politics becomes an understandable response to liberal disenchantment and perceptions of crisis and chaos. Many of us want to feel "a more livable and intimate sociality" (p. 227) and will pursue that feeling when the path to actually living that politics seems too difficult. Reading Berlant and Roquet together

offers a way to understanding the merging that Roquet argues is part of ambient subjectivation. When politics is something ambient, something overheard, the affective attachment to the leader as the subject of this ambience can be cruel indeed.

Bolivians have come together in the streets, organized by trade unions and neighbourhood coalitions, to change policy and unseat presidents. The displacement of the will of the people onto a flimsy institutional measure here echoes the larger neoliberal assault on the social when it promises too great to control, even by left-leaning presidents like Morales. Despite Evo and MAS's stated opposition to neoliberalism — as Kepa Artaraz (2012) puts it, "'neoliberal' is used as a term of abuse" (p. 124) — their policies have led observers to question the degree to which Morales is moving "beyond neoliberalism [or] simply vernacularising liberalism to make it more democratic and more relevant to Bolivia's Indigenous peoples" (Postero, 2011, p. 63). Analyzing a decade of economic policy, Jeffrey Webber (2016) has argued that MAS used a façade of economic reform and redistribution but adhered to an underlying logic of neoliberalism, and in fact strengthened neoliberal economic relations.

The process in which Evo comes to permeate Bolivians' sense of the political through ambient media echoes a larger imposition of himself as the middle term between the individual political subject and political power. The referendum graffiti shows clearly this convergence, with Evo's claiming of the most basic words of yes and no mirrored by his directing of popular energies to an ineffectual institutional process. At the same time, I am reproducing Morales's power here by attributing him agency in this process. It is the people's own efforts, their organizing and stenciling and writing on walls, that made Evo ambient and that directed popular energies to the plebiscite. Drawing on Michel de Certeau, Tracey Bowen (2013) characterizes graffiti as "a spatializing practice" that leaves a "residue" or "traces" of the artists' performances

behind (n.p.). Just like Americans might want to invest in a Trump-like figure to steer them through the harsh waters of politics, we can think of the graffiti around Evo Morales not just as a call to vote, but a way in which Bolivians made a territorial claim to their cities: not for themselves, but for a "performing icon" (Marino, 2018) who would continue to beckon others in through these traces. This is what I think Roquet means when he writes that individuals act on "the fantasy of a totally autonomous self and the fantasy of merging with the atmosphere." All the while, these continued encounters with the ambient media of referendum graffiti helped the question of Evo's leadership become atmospheric, and thus continuously existential.

In a way, we can see the graffiti in terms of what Judith Butler (1997) deems "the idealization of the speech act as sovereign action" (p. 82), which casts the speech act itself as performative, enacting what it declares; they write, "It is as if the proper power of the state has been expropriated, delegated to its citizens, and the state then reemerges as a neutral instrument to which we seek recourse to protect us from other citizens, who have become revived emblems of a (lost) sovereign power" (Ibid.). The referendum graffiti's persistence in space shows a once-held faith in the sovereign power these words, "sí" and "no," could enact within the liberal mechanism of the plebiscite. As it becomes ambient, the graffiti's speech act loses some of its performative promise, increasingly displacing people's investments onto Evo, who has become all-encompassing not through his sovereign body but through his hold on the affective atmosphere and thus a collective sense of political possibility. At the time I visited, when Bolivians were held in a state of political suspense, these words served as a tether to a politics of neoliberal representation, their "absorption in the present process" (Berlant, 2011, p. 262) of politics ultimately emphasizing the "*sense* of belonging" through the figure of Evo over "the hard questions of distributing resources, risk, and vulnerability in the polis" (Ibid.). This

investment in the sovereign power of the speech act, like the investment in the body of the sovereign itself, can lead more easily to the individual or the mass than the collective that holds populism's promise for the left.
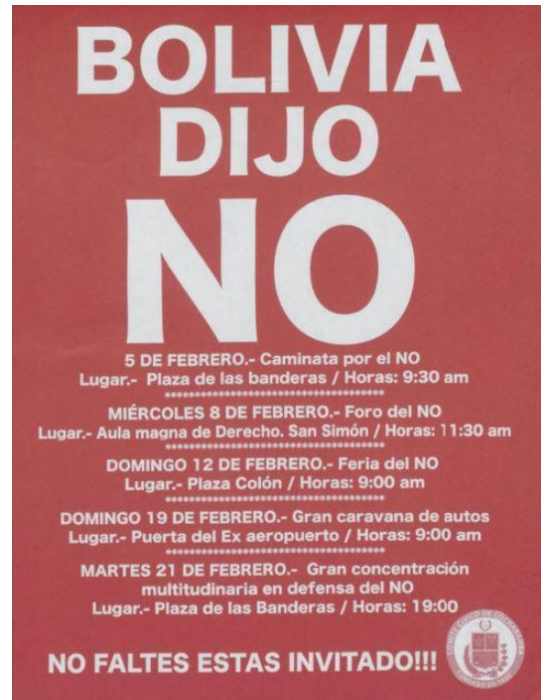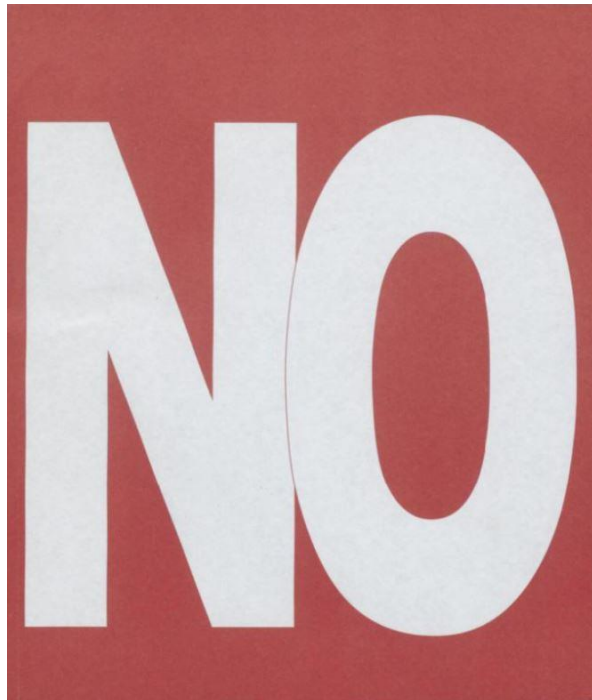
"Bolivia said no," with a list of demonstrations, published by the Comité Civico de Cochabamba (civic committee of Cochabamba), 2017. From the Digital Archive of Latin American and Caribbean Ephemera at Princeton University.

As this process is recalled in the built environment, so too is action, especially collective action, kept in the form of relitigating the question of yes or no. The graffiti existed alongside ephemeral media that advertised mass mobilizations on these terms. In this 2017 flyer, the first page is topped with the loud-and-clear message, "BOLIVIA DIJO NO" (Bolivia said no), and the information for a series of demonstrations is found in smaller text below. The second page of the flyer takes a similar form to the graffiti: just "NO" in massive letters, spanning the full page, able to be understood at a glance. Flyers like this one show that the persistence of the referendum

graffiti was not separate from its importance as an ongoing political question or source of public mobilization.

There were also massive marches for TIPNIS in the weeks I lived in La Paz. In both cases, people's allegiance to or rejection of Evo was not merely written on the walls but enacted by bodies in the streets. At the same time, however, those I spoke to still recounted feeling a sense of political inevitability. The graffiti does not point to political subject formation outside of collective action; rather, it shows how a populist leader can permeate ambient subjectivation and become, through his affective role in the political imaginary, the atmosphere of what is felt to be possible. Even in *Nuevo Mundo,* when painter and anthropologist Edgar Arandia stresses that the referendum graffiti was the vehicle many used to engage in politics, we see how political action gets caught up in the populist leader, such that the political process and the ambient media of the city merge with the question of Evo himself:

> In El Alto, young people are more active, they are more politicized. And there's a rejection of the president, but there are also people who support him. Where is it expressed? It's on the walls. From insults directed at the president, to praise of the president. Those kinds of battles on the walls, especially in El Alto, *are all centered around the president*. (Tamayo, 2020, emphasis my own)[54]

This is why I question the framing of populism's potential put forward by scholars like Angela Marino. In Marino's (2018) study of populist performance in Venezuela, she argues that traditional street performance allows actors and spectators to work through Manichaean divisions similar to those that figure in populism. People thus perform populism outside the explicitly

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[54] Translated by *Nuevo Mundo* from, "En El Alto, los jóvenes son más activos, están más politizados. Y hay un rechazo al presidente pero también hay gente que lo apoya. ¿Dónde se expresa? Está en los muros. Desde insultos al presidente, hasta loas al presidente. Esas especies de batallas que hay en las que paredes, sobre todo El Alto, todos se centran en torno al presidente."

political arena. Yet she also contends with the mythology of Simon Bolívar, the *libertador* who threw off the Spanish imperial yoke in favour of local settler colonial control, that animates Chavismo, outlining how the state's investment in national symbols can create new space for popular political performance. Former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez was something of a Bolívar superfan.[55] When he became president of Venezuela in 1999, Chávez changed the constitution so that Venezuela held the title of "Bolivarian Republic," and its first article named Bolívar as the basis of Venezuela's national values (Carrera Damas, 2008). The name of Bolívar was used for various Chavista projects, from the creation of social missions to the alliance of socialist countries in the region. For Chávez, Bolívar was not only the symbolic raw material in his recreation of himself, but also the people of Venezuela: "[W]e are one of the liberating peoples of the world, we are a people of creators, of poets, of fighters, of warriors, of workers, there's history to prove it, let's honour it" (qtd. in Cannon, 2009, p. 57).

Marino (2018) writes, "Rather than rejecting the iconic or symbolic value of Bolívar as an accessory or knockoff of state power, the performing icon of Bolívar is evidence of the popular exchange in remaking the state" (p. 172). By investing new meaning into old symbols, Chávez and company are provoking a public response "not to merely agitate, but as a means of opening up possibilities where they seem to stalemate" (p. 159). She moves from the "officialism" of top-down depictions of patriarchal stewardship, to the push and pull of Bolívar's popular appropriations and collective identifications, toward a final movement in which "the history of Bolívar moves into different hands, where the meaning of state itself is carried and reworked by an entirely new set of producers" (Ibid.). In this framing, symbolic contestations

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[55] Simón Rodriguez, Bolívar's radical tutor, wrote that Bolívar pledged in Rome to rid South America of its Spanish imperialists. Conway (2003) describes how Chávez began modeling his own persona in his hero's image by traveling to Rome and recreating the oath. In Chávez's early years, along with Ezequiel Zamora and Simón Rodriguez, Bolívar constituted the principal strand of his movement's "three-rooted tree" as "the Liberator, the symbol of equilibrium between the dualism of rebellion and ideology, force and consent" (Cannon, 2009, p. 57).

might draw our attention, but the important work makes productive use of these contestations by outgrowing their bounds altogether.

Her attention to the bottom-up performances of populism allows Marino to escape the stalemate of symbolic politics, but at times, she seems to be underselling the persistent stickiness that occurs when a historical figure becomes an icon. She describes, for instance, Pavel Éguez's mural depiction of Bolívar, in which Bolívar sits atop his white horse, embraced from behind by the revolutionary Manuela Sáenz and surrounded by a melding cast of faces of various ethnicities.[56] She writes, "No longer is Bolívar the white *criollo* (native-born Venezuelan of Spanish ancestry). No longer is Bolívar the sole commander in the saddle of governance" (p. 145). The depiction of the many figures melding into one, for her, is part of a "turn" in which "the remaking of Bolívar hangs in the balance between what people believe that image to be … and the reality falling short of that belief" (p. 160), with collective action as the crucial response.

Yet this is not the only outcome of such a collective identification. Another possibility of this identification is made explicit in her opening example, the film *Bolívar Soy Yo,* in which a Bolívar impersonator ends up kickstarting a contemporary social movement. After laying claim to this iconic persona, the protagonist's life is no longer his own: he is swept into revolution not by choice, but because Bolívar is a "performing icon," not merely a "cult object" but "a living body that continues to perform its own imaginaries" (Marino, 2018, p. 137). That the present-day revolutionary imaginaries are a far cry from the "discourses of order, managed development, and discipline" (Kingsbury, 2015, p. 252) that once predominated should not shock us; after all, as Bobby Benedicto (2021) writes about the Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, "The sense of subjective freedom that revolution affords … is also what renders it proximate to authoritarian projects, which, as we have seen, likewise operate by offering the enjoyment of 'pulling

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[56] Pavel Éguez, *La Patria naciendo de la ternura* (Patriotism Is Born from Tenderness), Caracas.

sovereignly the strings of history.' Indeed, the pleasures of revolution might be described using language that directly evokes the sense of mastery made available through the sovereign's incorruptible body" (p. 734). The power and enjoyment to be found in this body is not merely a top-down offering to be negotiated and repurposed by the public, but a powerful force in its own right.
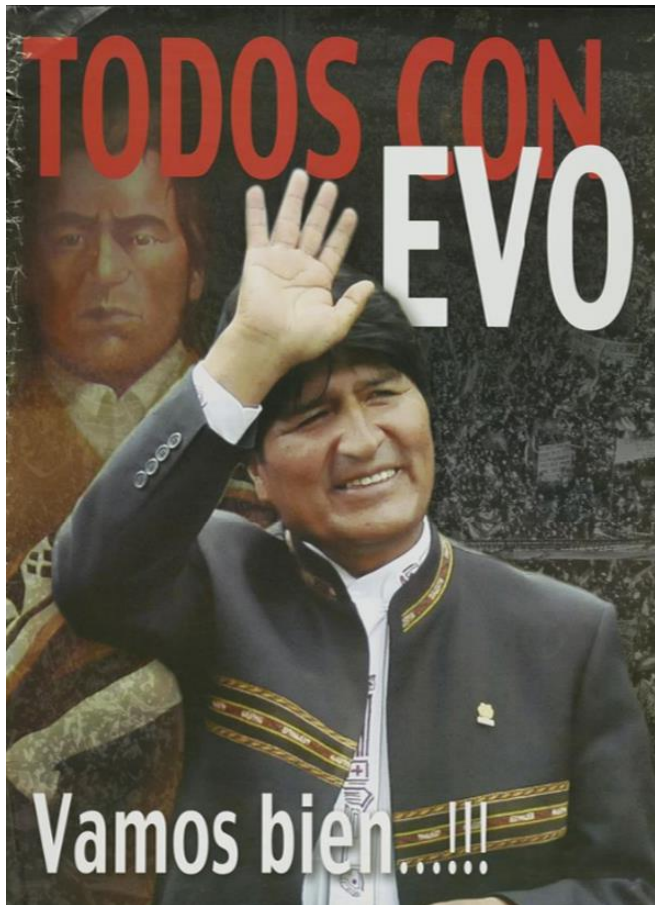
"Todos con Evo" (everyone with Evo), MAS-IPSP, 2014-2015. From the Digital Archive of Latin American and Caribbean Ephemera at Princeton University.

The power found in these embodied identifications holds relevance in Bolivia as well. The day before Evo Morales was inaugurated, he went to Tiwanaku, a sacred Aymara site that contains ruins from a pre-Inca civilization. As he stood in front of the crowd that had amassed, he made reference to the Aymara revolutionary Túpac Katari (Postero, 2007). Túpac Katari was an anti-colonial insurgent, laying siege against the Spanish-held city of La Paz for roughly six months before his brutal death — like fellow revolutionary Túpac Amari, he was quartered by the Spanish. His last words are recorded as, "I die today, but I will return, transformed into thousands and thousands" (qtd. in Sagar & Stephenson, 1998, p. 2). At this ceremony, Morales promised that these thousands were not resisting power but taking it.

The pre-inauguration ritual was not his first reference to Katari, nor would it be the last: he would frame his own project as the continuation of Katari's in speeches, with his own role

following in Katari's footsteps made sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit. MAS, Morales's political party, even distributed posters of the two figures together. In one, a reproduced photograph of Morales waving takes centre stage; to his left is an artistic rendering of Katari, and to his right an image of a crowd. Large text at the top reads, "TODOS CON EVO" (*everyone with Evo*), and at the bottom, "Vamos bien…!!!" (*we're making progress*). Yet before Evo's reintroduction of him, Katari was an important part of political life, and his persona is still politically important outside of the confines of MAS party politics today. In Nicole Fabricant's (2012) research on Bolivia's landless peasant movement, the *Movimiento sin tierra* (MST), she recounts the crucial role Katari played within the pantheon of symbols for this revolutionary group. For the leader of the Santa Cruz chapter, the Aymara sociologist Pablo Mamani, Katari was both an icon for his own personal activism and a figure animating MST's consciousness raising. In his opening speech in San Pedro, Mamani emphasized the historical continuity of MST's struggle: "Today, we are [Katari's] millions…" (qtd. in Fabricant, 2012, p. 8)

These are not empty words. Mamani recollects that during a brush with death while marching, when a paramilitary group brutalized his group of protestors, all he could do was think of the strength of the martyred Katari, and how his sacrifice would render him part of Katari's cycle of death and rebirth. Fabricant writes that it is not uncommon for people to make sense of their lives by trying on this persona, and become one of the thousands, now rendered as millions, that can collectively lay claim to Katari's legacy. It is thus a role that can be generative for the movement and for themselves, and these gains accrue back onto the icon of Katari himself: "the image takes on new political meaning as people link it to new forms of living, producing, and providing for one another" (Fabricant, 2012, p. 15). The above poster, in which Evo is practically shadowed by Katari and turned toward an indecipherable crowd, implies that *he* bears the weight

of carrying the mantle of the Aymara revolutionary. Moreover, it is his task to act as intermediary between Katari and his "thousands," now rendered as "millions." The implications of this mediating role become even clearer in the context of the mythology surrounding the Incan leader Atahualpa, expanded in the 18th-century to include Katari and fellow revolutionary Tupac Amaru, which make possible resurrection and "eternal reincorporation … their triumphant return with creative powers that increase their capacity to change the world" (Ibid., p. 9)

One could position the MST's adoption of Katari as a way in which Morales has opened up the symbolic space of the nation; given the extent to which Katari was reinvigorated as a national icon since his inauguration, this would be a fair initial reading of the situation. Yet the counterpoint is that Evo Morales has continually tried to bind Katari's potent iconography to himself through the implication of rebirth. This connection can extend into the images of Katari that Fabricant writes are everywhere in present-day Bolivia, whether in the meeting rooms of the MST, in "paraphernalia in the offices of powerful NGO technocrats" (p. 16), or littering the cityscape in any number of urban centres in the country. "The image might be fragmented," she writes, "but it is not abstracted from indigenous people's daily struggles to survive, to maneuver through racialized and violent city structures" (p. 15). Both the individual identification and ambient mediation that Fabricant describes suggest alternate affiliations for Katari, yet we can see this multiplicity as a larger network of ambient meaning that Morales wants to access.

Conclusion

When the Organization of American States raised alarm bells about irregularities during the 2019 election, the international condemnation was exactly what opponents of Morales needed to take to the streets in force. The supposed irregularities were ultimately challenged by international NGOs (CEPR, 2020) and researchers (Idrobo et al., 2022) who failed to see how the

technical details the OAS cited would have been enough to rig the election in Evo's favour, but by that time it was too late: after hundreds of thousands of Bolivians had protested and counter-protested, Evo Morales had lost the support of the military and fled the country. He was replaced by Jeanine Áñez, whose ultra-Christian, right-wing provisional government soon overstayed its welcome. When it did so, it was up to the Bolivian people to force them out of office and reinstate democratic elections. On October 18, 2020, the masista candidate Luis Arce was elected president in a landslide majority.

The sense of constraint I have outlined in this chapter, the feeling of being held within a moment that becomes synonymous with a man, can be broken. After all, as Berlant notes (2011), the *sense* of politics is not coterminous with the *scene* of politics. The possibilities that people feel exist and those actually available to them are not the same. Evo's ambient mediations still, I argue, worked to colour people's sense of possibility as political subjects, especially political subjects acting together in concert. Despite Bolivia's long history of regime change through public protest, it was not until international attention shone a spotlight on the situation that the situation shifted, and Evo's atmospheric hold on Bolivian politics was shown to be vulnerable.

That is not to say that there were no previous coup attempts or mass mobilizations that threatened Morales' hold on power, or that the Arce government was an improvement to Morales' tenure as president. Arce and her *golpista* government were much, much worse. In spite of the ways in which MAS attempted become a "government of the social movements" by co-opting progressive groups and subsuming radical criticism, they only periodically repressed popular causes; even when they did so, the TIPNIS conflict shows that the state was unable to hold the social movements captive in practical terms. In certain respects, this kind of trade-off, in which progressive social demands are at least partially met so long as they align with party and

leader, is one many on the left would be willing to make. Scholars like Fabricant & Postero (2019) even show how Indigenous groups can manoeuvre deftly within such an environment, able to play both sides, right and left, to assert and protect their rights.

Yet anyone considering a left populist response to the far right's ascendance should consider that such trade-offs occur not only in the sphere of political action we traditionally consider. Morales' posturing as Tupac Katari and a wedding officiant shows how on a symbolic level, he seeks to cast himself as the middle term between individuals and sovereign power. An ambient media framing of the Evo graffiti shows how individuals continue to do this work, reaffirming their status as individual political subjects and Evo's atmospheric feel while furthering their attachment to an institutional politics that was ultimately no match for Morales' political desires. In its own way, this graffiti shows how populism these days operates not only through the spectacular event, but the banal everyday, to situate people within a political moment. In recasting neoliberal visions of a politics without the political for the left, this graffiti illustrates that the flip side of populist pleasure is populist constraint.

If, as Chantal Mouffe believes, left populism is the only way to meaningfully counter the ascendance of the right without threatening, but instead reinvigorating and redirecting liberal democratic institutions, I think we must account for the compromises and broken promises that come along with such a calculation. The ambient graffiti of Evo Morales is not an oppressive imposition upon citizens, a force that prevents action or agency, but a reflection of the ways in which even justice-seeking, politically minded engagements can just as powerfully hold us in a sense of stasis as achieve the radical action we intend. Furthermore, this is not so much the fault of Evo himself: the very role he occupies is one that, by Laclau's own logic, should extend discursively and affectively through our very sense of political possibility, so much so that it is

popularly reinscribed to keep politics coherent. This operates not instead of but alongside the manifestations of larger social and economic forces, such that the disappointments of referendum graffiti and those of neoliberal capitulations are intertwined, in city streets and in the air.

CONCLUSION

I too want to be able to feel as though I am vibing in a mass of people without having to actually

socialize with them. I too enjoy the ambient buzz of tens of thousands of lives hurtling by me at

any given moment. But also, idk if that sort of thing is good for the world, lol.

-Brandon Taylor (@blgtylr)[57]

This thesis began with a provocation: what would it mean for the populist leader to be *the*

media figure, even as the media differ? Despite the inevitably, overly broad reach of such a

claim, it was in large part informed by Twitter: the way in which it acts as a stage for politics,

intensifying and crystallizing political discourse, connecting and cohering people around

political information, and yet also funneling popular attention and energies into often fruitless

symbolic and representational battles. Twitter was unique in the way it could evoke

entertainment and powerlessness, anger and compulsion. I say *was* because, now that Elon Musk

has taken ownership of Twitter, this could all change. He has already laid off thousands of

workers — around half of its staff — and my previous fears that he was attempting to take

Trump's place on the platform[58] are now matched by new apprehensions that a mass exodus will

occur. These fears, as well as the outpouring of commentary more generally, are likely overly

simplistic. As tech commentator Edward Ongweso Jr. (2022) writes, Twitter was already on the

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[57] November 6, 2022, https://twitter.com/blgtylr/status/1589320637004206080.

[58] Users have already noted the Trump-like status of Elon Musk in the days surrounding his Twitter takeover: he has become the poster around whom discourse is centred, the quasi-permanent "main character." See, for instance, this tweet from tech columnist Navneet Alang (@navalang): "Twitter these days feels much like it did in 2017. There's a rich white guy main character who vacillates between being dumb and trolling. Everyone is mad at him. Everyone is yelling at each other. There are threads all over as people work out their anxiety in public. Hellsite." November 2, 2022, https://twitter.com/navalang/status/1587974371414523905. From the popular account Populism Updates (@PopulismUpdates): "I'm surprised to see multiple people asking for context on this, I just assume all Elon controversies are psychically blasted into every Twitter user's head as soon as they happen," October 30, 2022, https://twitter.com/PopulismUpdates/status/1586806988305940480.

path of decline, like Facebook and Instagram, before the recent takeover. In their stead, "we're getting YouTube, TikTok, Twitch, and an endless number of streaming platforms that replace the more rhizomatic structure of polydirectional conversation with something essentially unidirectional: a broadcast model, which sees 'mutuals' replaced by a creator and their audience" (n.p.). To borrow from Astra Taylor, digital democracy may not exist, but we'll miss it when it's gone.[59]

Across these platforms, there is a tendency to feel like whatever filter bubble you occupy is more representative of the platform than it truly is.[60] This is not even exclusive to social media: to take my own example, the omnipresence of referendum graffiti in Cotahuma, the district in Bolivia where I worked, led me to find it wherever I visited; I was preconditioned to expect it, and would have likely felt its absence. This mismatch lacks some of the urgency I attributed to Twitter's particular hold on the American media system. Because of the less rhizomatic nature of these platforms, to put it in Ongweso's (and Deleuze and Guattari's) terms, although we may no longer experience exactly what American writer Brandon Taylor describes as "the ambient buzz of tens of thousands of lives hurtling by [us] at any given moment," nor are we moving back to an "audience democracy" of years past, defined by Bernard Manin (1997) and others in terms of the role that largely unidirectional mass media representations played in politics.

In spite of recent media uncertainty, there is still good reason to attend to the ambient, and especially its potential to work on us, and even against our interests. In the prior two chapters, I described a kind of populism that operates through the ambient mediation of the

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[59] From the title of her 2019 book, *Democracy May Not Exist But We'll Miss it When It's Gone.*

[60] It is not uncommon to come across a video on TikTok commenting on the fact that a particular "sound," which the user has assumed to be viral based on the number of videos they have seen use it, is in fact particular to their community, or flooding their algorithmically driven "for you page."

leader's persona. My focus was on what it might mean for the formation of political affects, subjects, and communities to premise our model of political solidarity upon a figure that, in cohering, spreads out across time and through space, a figure that though constitutively empty operates as a "performing icon" (Marino, 2018), a figure that feels atmospheric. Although ambient media cannot be reduced to some "Orwellian … technology of control that standardizes places and subjects" (McCarthy, 2004, p. 188), they are not incidental to how we feel our way through the world.

In this preoccupation with the ambience of politics I have drawn heavily on the work of Lauren Berlant, in particular the chapter "On the desire for the political" from *Cruel Optimism*. Berlant describes the scene of politics as one in which many of us cling to institutions largely hollowed out of any democratic content. Turning away and building alternatives is difficult work. It is far easier to maintain these attachments, perhaps paradoxically through investment in figures that seek to reduce political solidarity to affective attunement. Berlant writes,

> How can we track the divergences between politically orchestrated emotions and their affective environments? Traditionally, political solidarity is a [sic] more of a structure than a feeling — an identification with other people who are similarly committed to a project that does not require affective continuity or warm personal feeling to sustain itself. But maintaining solidarity requires skills for adjudicating incommensurate visions of the better good life. The atrophy of these skills is at risk when politics is reduced to the demand for affective attunement, insofar as the sense of belonging is threatened by the inconvenience of antagonistic aims. (Berlant, 2011, p. 228)

Berlant's analysis of the "crisis ordinary" of contemporary politics, and how people feel their way through it, is not immediately in opposition to Mouffe and Laclau's approach.

Mouffe's vision of politics is agonistic, rather than associational — she puts emphasis on politics as a space of conflict rather than collaboration — so there is no reason to surmise that she or Laclau would undervalue the need for a structured solidarity, nor would be surprised by political antagonisms. In a sense, this is precisely what they argue for by introducing their "chain of equivalences," their interlinking of social demands that are not compatible *sui generis.* Affective investments are necessary for this consolidation, but they are in no way sufficient.

At the same time, I think it is worth considering the critique from Michael Bray (2015), taken up again by Gillian Hart (2019), that Laclau and Mouffe, respectively, downplay the extent to which populism became salient initially not in response to neoliberalism but as its handmaiden. Hart writes that although Mouffe (2018) cites Stuart Hall's work on Margaret Thatcher, she offers little consideration of the implications of Thatcher's role as both a neoliberal and populist crusader in *For a Left Populism*. Mouffe instead emphasizes Hall's lesson that we must learn from Thatcher, in order to ground Mouffe's own conviction that a left populist response is needed in the current conjuncture. I think these critiques, while overstated, nevertheless raise good questions — ones that are specific to this current moment, so the prior history of populism cannot truly be a guide. How can we be sure that in this present conjuncture, we can put forth a left populist program that does not end up capitulating to neoliberal logics? If not, would a left populism, based upon a negotiated rather than felt solidarity, be strong enough to win power?

In spite of Mouffe's claim that "the people and the political frontier that defines its adversary are constructed through political struggle, and they are always susceptible to rearticulation through counter-hegemonic interventions" (p. 63) — in other words, that the specific discursive constructions and affective investments that make up a populist movement are

somewhat malleable — Hall warns that they are not as malleable as we might like: "All discourse has 'conditions of existence' which, although they cannot fix or guarantee particular outcomes, set limits or constraints on the process of articulation itself. Historical formations, which consist of previous but powerfully forged articulations, may not be guaranteed forever in place by some abstract historical law, but they are deeply resistant to change, and do establish lines of tendency and boundaries which give to the fields of politics and ideology the 'open structure' of a formation and not simply the slide into an infinite and neverending plurality" (p. 10). There are lessons here that extend past ideology, to the very tools we use to build our political movements, and the attention we must pay to where they have historically led.

Throughout this thesis, I have tried to show the ways in which, through the figure of the populist leader, populist logics can be displaced from their desired effect: the flourishing of collective action and radical political change. It is not that the populist leader preempts popular mobilization; but in giving it new meaning, he imposes a new set of incentives and constraints. I think it is essential to understand these incentives and constraints not only because of the larger political stakes but because of the role populist figures come to play in the lives of citizens. In *The Practice of Everyday Life,* Michel de Certeau explores how individuals get by within a highly controlled consumer culture by acting in ways that subtly subvert, resist, or stymie elites. Although his best-known example documents how people move through the city, he is concerned with these tactics in how people engage with mass media too, writing, "The thousands of people who buy a health magazine, the customers in a supermarket, the practitioners of urban space, the consumers of newspaper stories and legends — what do they make of what they 'absorb,' receive, and pay for? What do they do with it?" (de Certeau, 1984 {1980}, p. 31).

What of the publics of populist media? The formation and spread, the take-up and disavowal of such media are not impersonal forces operating within politics — though they may feel that way — but are the product of human actions and technological processes at every step of the way. This question of what people *do* with populist media they consume, and especially how they use it to navigate through feelings of disempowerment, was what initially led me to write this thesis; it is one that I still hold to be crucial, despite the back seat it ended up taking to the context in which they do it. I offer that the myriad of uses to which the populist persona can be put by the people who invest in him is perhaps not separate from a larger problematic of populism. It is precisely the personal usefulness of the leader as discursive construction and "performing icon" that renders him so well-suited to becoming ambient.

After all, it is the people of populism who, operating within particular media systems as well as political and economic logics, transport and reinscribe and contest and ultimately make the leader atmospheric. Part of this, as I argued in Chapter One, is because the populist leader is a powerfully affective, affecting vessel through which to experience politics. This extends not just to his ability to overcome contradiction, which already makes him a powerful figure to invest in; when this is combined with the movement of becoming ambient, it gives the leader an atmospheric quality, and we can think of investment in the leader as offering Roquet's (2016) illusion of merging with the larger atmosphere of politics. Chapter Two, which takes up Roquet and Berlant's writing on ambience, shows how this sense of power can become a sense of constraint, operating most potently on the citizens who are not part of the "people" of populism, but also on those who are. The ambient mediations of Evo Morales did not preclude collective action, nor did they hold Evo away from critique and pushback. What they did was put Evo as the symbolic and affective background of the nation, as well as its centre.

It is important that we account for these possibilities because, if not left populism, then what? Are we doomed to watch our politics become, through "a series of strategically effective interventions" that prey upon moral panics (Hall, 1988, p. 143), an even more grotesque imitation of democracy? Unless we contend with people's disempowerment and alienation, let alone the forces preying upon them, we cannot be surprised when they choose a right populism that calls forth "the memory of a fantastic figure through which we once recognized ourselves as agents of history and casts it against the passage of time over which we have had no mastery" (Benedicto, 2021, p. 729). Nor can we expose the evil, incoherence, or contradiction of the present and expect it to inevitably lead to change.

When up against actors like Donald Trump, a left populist response may be a winning one. It would thus be foolish to discount the power of populism, or its potential, wholesale if it is the only adequate defence at present. Yet those committed to democratic renewal cannot content themselves with such a response, or risk feeling held by the very figure who should open up new horizons of possibility. It is of note, then, that Stuart Hall (1988) does not call for a left populism, but instead a "popular democratic" response to Thatcherism. This means that, "…far from occupying a different world from that of Thatcherism, we can only renew the project of the left by precisely occupying the same world that Thatcherism does, and building from that a different form of society" (Hall, 1988, p. 15). Without the figure of the populist leader, building this society will surely be difficult, perhaps even more so now than when he wrote. Still, it is hard to say the effort is not worthwhile.

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