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Dancing Around White Fragility: El Vez 4 Prez in the Time of Trump

This article initially analyzes the 2016 political landscape to pinpoint the forces that fueled Donald J. Trump's campaign and election. Turning to artist Robert Lopez's performance as El Vez at San Diego's Taco Fest, I discuss how his performance conjoins Chicanidad with popular entertainment, using humour, spectacle, and music to forestall the defensive moves of white fragility, allowing him to speak across divisive lines. Lopez-as-El-Vez deftly sidesteps defensive reactions as he asserts uncomfortable racial truths. By grounding this show in the shared culture of popular entertainment, he uses performance to make a pointed political, cultural, and racialized intervention. In performance, El Vez not only outmanoeuvres white fragility, but also constructs a contact-zone audiotopia that allows for the practice of a fun, messy, raucous collectivity. His performances lay bare the structures of racism as they simultaneously envision a more equitable future, accessible through El Vez himself. Karen Jean Martinson is an Assistant Professor in the Communications, Media Arts and Theatre programme. She also works professionally as a dramaturg and director.

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Clad in red and white striped bell-bottomed overalls, a blue jacket with red and white striped lapels and big stars on its tails, and a stars and stripes top hat, El Vez, The Mexican Elvis patriotically announced his “candidacy” for President of the United States at San Diego's Taco Fest in May 2016. It's not his first run—El Vez 4 Prez, a politically themed rock concert, has been an election-year mainstay since the George W. Bush years. In fact, the costumes and the set lists see only minor revisions in the tour's many permutations. However, during the 2016 election cycle, the shockingly unorthodox candidacy of Donald Trump changed the

tenor of EV4P. Trump launched his campaign with the racist degradation of Mexican immigrants as raping, drug-dealing illegals. Soon after Taco Fest, he slandered a federal judge of Mexican descent. Given Trump's generalized racism, his xenophobic rants, and his obsession with the Southern border, perhaps there was no better artist to counter Trumpism through performance than El Vez. Boldly calling out Trump's angry rhetoric, he observed, "People are getting more and more hateful,"¹ as he condemned the vitriol fomented by the then-candidate. And though he humourously proclaimed to be "running a campaign of music, love, and tacos," his frustration—or at least that of artist Robert Lopez, who has performed as El Vez for a remarkable 28 years—clearly came through in his stage banter, which is one aspect of his show that *always* adapts to meet the moment. His performance called out Trump's retrograde politics of white supremacy, and offered as an alternative a fully racialized, yet fully inclusive, social space.

EV4P jumps headfirst into the contentious topics of politics and race, yet the overall mood of the show is raucous, playful, and welcoming. Though he condemns not only Trump, but the white privilege the candidate represents and the white supremacy he seeks to bolster, the character of El Vez artfully sidesteps extreme reactions that discussions of racial inequality normally provoke. As Whiteness Studies scholar Robin DiAngelo makes clear, white fragility often leads white people to engage in a series of defensive moves whenever uncomfortable conversations about race occur.² Indeed, public intellectuals Jamelle Bouie and Ta-Nehisi Coates suggest that the Trump Presidential bid, and the extreme fanaticism of his supporters, is in fact a sociopolitical manifestation of white fragility writ large. Thus, it is useful to analyze EV4P at Taco Fest through the lens of white fragility, noting how Lopez-as-El-Vez creates a venue in which discussions of race take a different route. After working through the specifics of DiAngelo, Bouie, and Coates' assertions to pinpoint how race and racism came to play such an outsized role in the 2016 election, this article will consider how Lopez interrogates current political debates through El Vez, using popular entertainment to stage an intentional, racialized intervention into this discourse. Through his blending of popular culture, Chicana³ iconography, and Elvisness, he is able to disarm the defensive moves of white fragility and embody inclusivity through the construction of a contact-zone audiotopia, thereby voicing a radical political and cultural message through a pointedly racialized critique. His performances lay bare the structures of racism as they simultaneously envision a more equitable future, accessible through El Vez himself.

Whiteness and White Fragility

By calling himself El Vez, the Mexican Elvis, Lopez foregrounds both race and immigration in his performances. In his 2016 campaign, Trump's ethnonationalist platform also focused on these issues, yet with a punitive vindictiveness. That is because Trumpism revels in a whiteness that remains deracialized while white privilege is asserted. This section tracks how such racial invisibility was put under pressure by the Obama Presidency. Though Obama sought inclusivity and was even said to foretell a post-racial society, his black body, combined with the multiracial

electorate who supported him, still caused many whites to feel uncomfortably racialized. This helps to explain the rise of Trump; the man who entered politics via birtherism—which sought to delegitimize the Obama presidency, call out his racialized body, and further label him a foreign other—promised a return to an uncomplicated, unmarked, yet dominant whiteness.

The field of Whiteness Studies has usefully conceptualized whiteness not as a biological imperative, but rather as an advantaged position within a racial hierarchy—specifically for this article, that of the United States. It is, as DiAngelo notes, “a constellation of processes and practices.”⁴ Because whiteness commands inordinate power and privilege, as Faedra Chatard Carpenter discusses, it acts “as a fluctuating abstraction that fosters ideologies with both discursive and material consequences.”⁵ Scholars have also taken care to articulate how race is factored differently for white-identifying subjects and people of colour. Simply put, most white people see neither their race nor the privileges it affords them. It is other bodies—bodies of colour—that are raced in relation to the unmarked body of the white subject. Moreover, whites often do not see themselves as members of a racial group, but rather as unique individuals. DiAngelo describes how this contributes to the “discourse of individualism,” a defensive manoeuvre that protects whites from having to engage in conversations of race by asserting that such conversations only perpetuate racism—or inflict it on well-meaning whites. Through the discourse of individualism, whites argue that we are best able to end racism by engaging with each other as individuals, a position that is woefully blind to the historic and social context of institutionalized racial oppression within the United States.⁶ Additionally, this insistence on individualism impacts the way racism is often understood by whites, not as a structured system in which all are implicated, but instead as individual acts committed by “bad” people.

Because whiteness maintains the privilege of racial invisibility as it holds the dominant social position, whites often feel discomfort when racial discussions call attention to their own racialized bodies and ask them to consider the experiences of people of colour as central. DiAngelo conceptualizes this discomfort as stemming from a “lack of racial stamina” that she dubs white fragility.⁷ She elaborates, “White fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.”⁸ These defensive moves include emotional displays (particularly of anger, fear, and guilt), but also several hostile behaviours, such as argumentation, the refusal to engage, or withdrawing/leaving the conversation entirely. Thus, the defence of white fragility can quite quickly turn into offence⁹ in an attempt to “reinstate white racial equilibrium”¹⁰ and ensure “that racism will not be faced.”¹¹

While DiAngelo primarily explores interpersonal manifestations of white fragility, Bouie, Chief Political Analyst for the online magazine *Slate*, widens the scope of her argument to explain Trump’s ascendancy. In his article, “How Trump Happened,” he seeks to answer the question of why Trump has come to power at this specific historical moment.¹² Noting that the working class in general has been in

decline for decades, and the white working class stagnant since the 1990s, he posits that Trump's nomination and election was not simply linked to the perilous economic fortunes of his supporters. Similarly, in looking at the policy decisions of the Obama Administration, centre-left policies made with compromises to centre-right politicians, he suggests that it was not a response to President Obama as a rather mainstream political leader. What remains, Bouie concludes, is Obama—and the multiracial coalition that helped elect him—as *political symbol*. Bouie writes, "You can read the rise of Obama and the projected future of a majority nonwhite America as a racial stress that produced a reaction from a number of white Americans—and forced them into a defensive crouch." Coates reaches a similar conclusion in his article, "My President Was Black," noting how the Obama presidency threatened whiteness' "badge of advantage;" he posits that "the elevation of Barack Obama communicated that the power of the badge had diminished."¹³

Strikingly, Obama as political symbol houses two different, yet interrelated, triggers of racial stress: that of his own blackness, and that of the multiracial voting block that stood behind him. This helps to explain the expansiveness of Trump's racist rhetoric, which includes his labelling of blacks as criminals and thugs who destroy cities, Mexicans as rapists and animals who threaten the nation, and radical Islamic terrorists who fiendishly seek to kill (white) citizens.¹⁴ Starting with the anti-black racism embedded in his birther claims leveled against Obama, Trump's rhetoric sweeps outward to a more generalized white supremacy. Uncomfortable that a black President signals the dismantling of USAmerica's racial hierarchy, and that a rising number of nonwhite citizens will soon wield majority power, Trumpism can be understood as whiteness' attempt to restore racial equilibrium and to maintain its privileged social position.¹⁵

This racial stress is compounded by the myth of the post-racial society that the Obama presidency was said to signify. In the lead-up to his election and inauguration, post-racial became a buzz-word among the media, from both the left and the right, with both sides reading him—or more specifically, reading his body—as a marker of national progress. Unsurprisingly, the election of Obama did not miraculously solve issues of race in the United States. Indeed, it could not; as Shelby Steele nimbly points out in his opinion piece, "Obama's post-racial promise," published the day after the 2008 election, the myth of post-racial idealism that Obama embodies is built on a contradiction:

When whites...proudly support Obama for his post-racialism, they unwittingly embrace race as their primary motivation. They think and act racially, not post-racially. The point is that a post-racial society is a bargainer's ploy: It seduces whites with a vision of their racial innocence precisely to coerce them into acting out of a racial motivation.¹⁶

In this configuration, Obama not only assuages white guilt about racism, but also stands as proof that it has been overcome, and therefore no more discussion—or policy—is needed to correct it. Steele muses, "So I don't think whites really want

change from Obama as much as they want documentation of change that has already occurred.”

Indeed, this is the insidious side of the post-racial myth. Much like DiAngelo’s discourse of individualism, it advocates for colourblindness as if longstanding social and economic barriers to equality have been removed. The call to colourblindness is itself problematic; it encourages assimilation rather than combating racial inequality. Moreover, achieving colourblindness means that we neither see nor speak of race and therefore elide how race-based policies and laws of the past deliberately have put people of colour at enormous disadvantage. Thus, appeals to colourblindness not only reject the cultural identities of people of colour, but also disavow the racist past out of which that identity was forged. Martell Teasley and David Ikard continue the post-racial critique, pointing out how post-racialism “is a cause championed by those who benefit from its use as a form of social capital in maintaining the status quo of the American power structure.”¹⁷ In its effort to arrive at a place of current (white) healing, it refuses to reckon with past oppressions. Post-racialism instead asserts that the United States has arrived as a meritocracy; in ignoring the material realities of past and present inequality and oppression, the blame for unequal social and economic position can thus be placed squarely on underprivileged non-white people.

The reality, of course, is that despite the rhetoric of post-racialism and the seeming euphoria that accompanied his inauguration, Obama is not and was never a post-racial President because USAmerica is not and was never a post-racial—or more correctly, a post-racist—society. Indeed, the research of political scientists Michael Tesler and David O. Sears reveals that, far from being post-racial, the candidacy and presidency of Obama was in fact the most racialized in US history. They note, “the simple perceptual salience of his race insured that racial predispositions would be unusually central to voters’ evaluations of him.”¹⁸ The very materiality of his black body ensured that citizens would evaluate everything he did through a racial lens. In what Tesler and Sears dub the “two sides of racialization,”¹⁹ the data demonstrate that racial attitudes worked both for and against Obama. Racial liberals favored Obama over white Democrats and saw him as a step forward in race relations; bigots distrusted and demeaned him and his family from the start, the vitriol of their opposition only increasing with his time in office; and those with ambiguous understanding of race were left to navigate these competing narratives.

While Obama’s body “made his race chronically accessible,”²⁰ his rhetoric—exemplified in the 2004 convention speech that brought him national acclaim—more often strove for inclusivity. He carefully walked a tightrope in his public discussions of race, going high when they go low (to paraphrase Michelle Obama’s 2016 convention speech) and taking care not to come off as too focused on race. As Coates documents in his incisive piece, this universalist urge was directly informed by Obama’s unique biography, which shielded him from the traumas of white supremacy that most African Americans must endure. Coates writes:

Only Obama, a black man who emerged from the best of white America, and thus could sincerely trust white America, could be so certain that he could achieve broad national appeal. And yet only a black man with that same biography could underestimate his opposition's resolve to destroy him.²¹

The contradiction that Obama embodies—his lofty, trusting message housed in his unmistakably black body—both facilitates the claims to post-raciality and blocks them. The racial transcendence of Obama's message is of course dependent on reading his black body as raced. His rhetoric can only be seen to overcome racial barriers because his body simultaneously reinforces that barrier. Extremely aware of Obama's race, citizens had no choice but to likewise become more aware of their own racial identities. Notes Bouie, "The Obama era didn't herald a post-racial America as much as it did a racialized one, where millions of *whites* were hyperaware of and newly anxious about their racial status."

Distressed at having to *feel* whiteness and fearing its privileged position under threat, white America seems to have doubled-down with its nomination and election of Donald J. Trump.²² Though Clinton won the popular vote by millions, the majority of white voters—both men and women—supported Trump.²³ Trump's refusal to bow to "political correctness," combined with his ethno-nationalist beliefs, is a public enactment of the defence-made-offence of white fragility, and he has empowered his base to proudly voice their own racial fatigue and frustration. Through rhetoric and action, Trump seeks to erase the Obama legacy, disempower the multiracial Obama coalition, and restore the privileged *status quo* of white supremacy.²⁴ Coates expresses both the pain and the inevitability of this reality, stating, "The election of Donald Trump confirmed everything I knew of my country and none of what I could accept. The idea that America would follow its first black president with Donald Trump accorded with its history."²⁵

El Vez's Racialized Intervention

If Trump's campaign publicly performed the racial anxieties of the United States, El Vez 4 Prez demonstrates how popular entertainment can stage crucial cultural and political interventions to a diverse public. The power of an El Vez performance stems from its emphasis on entertainment, abetted by spectacle and steeped in popular culture; these are the means through which Lopez conveys his critiques and connects to his audience. His shows also rely on the high performativity of the character of El Vez combined with Lopez's quick humour and prodigious musical knowledge. Finally, the rock performance genre engenders an alternate audiotopic space, a contact-zone of excitement and fun. Through these elements, Lopez-as-El-Vez advocates for inclusivity while sidestepping the defensive moves of white fragility.

El Vez, The Mexican Elvis is the fantastical creation of artist and musician Robert Lopez. From humble beginnings in 1989, when Lopez debuted El Vez during Memphis' Weep Week celebration, he has recorded several albums and toured

extensively, both nationally and internationally. In a tightly honed performance backed by his female singers, The Lovely Elvettes, and his band, The Memphis Mariachis, El Vez infuses popular songs with political and social themes suffused with Chicanidad. Though the King features heavily as a reference point, El Vez does not imitate. Instead he reimagines what it is to be an Elvis impersonator and what can be said through this frame.²⁶ He reworks the lyrics of Elvis (and other artists) to explore social issues and meld together diverse musical traditions into one spectacular creation: he sings of Chicano history, immigration rights, feminist empowerment, safe sex, religious tolerance, political change, and peace. Notes music scholar Michelle Habell-Pallán, “El Vez embodies the seemingly contradictory desires of a subject politicized by the Chicano movement, irreverent 1970s punk, and 1980s New Wave aesthetics” in a show that is “part strip-tease, part Chicana/o studies, part Labor History, and part History of Popular Music course.”²⁷

2016 was the inaugural (pun intended) year of San Diego Taco Fest, a day-long food and music festival. Sponsored by local radio stations, *San Diego CityBeat*, and beer and tequila companies, Taco Fest “is a food, music, and cultural celebration of all that makes San Diego America’s Finest City.”²⁸ Over 7000 people attended the sold-out event held in Waterfront Park, just off the bay, a rather bland, touristy, and well-policed area.²⁹ Audience demographics skewed white, though, given San Diego’s large Chicana and Latinx population, there were many people of colour present. Taco Fest was a ticketed event—\$20-\$85 plus cash for food and drink—with an emphasis on consumption. Audience political affiliations were unclear, as it was markedly apolitical, avoiding any discussion of social issues other than the goodness of tacos.³⁰ With twenty taco vendors, music, lucha libre wrestling, and plenty of alcohol, Taco Fest was basically a party to kick off the summer, and the draw was the food and drink as much as the musical lineup. Slotted to play in the late afternoon, El Vez faced a rather disengaged crowd, many of whom were likely not particularly interested in his performance.

Perhaps counterintuitively, Lopez-as-El-Vez thrives in an environment like Taco Fest. Recognizing its simplistic and commodified engagement with Mexican/Chicana culture (Lucha! Tequila! Tacos! A Mexican Elvis!), he crafts an entertaining spectacle that seems as if it will uphold the superficiality of the event, only to subvert that expectation by voicing strong political messages through a performance infused with a rich, subversive Chicanidad.³¹ At Taco Fest, he played a set of nine songs, each “translations” of popular hits rewritten to speak about immigrants’ rights, colonization, and other issues dominating the election discourse: Elvis’ “Suspicious Minds” became “Immigration Time,” Paul Simon’s “Graceland” became “Aztlán,” and Kim Wilde’s “Kids in America” became “Mexicans in America.” His lyrics and stage banter celebrated Chicana culture and proclaimed a progressive, inclusive politics. Strikingly, he could do in a popular venue what Obama was constrained from doing in his political life: El Vez proudly called attention to his racialized body and aligned himself with immigrants, even though Lopez is in fact a US citizen.

Lopez stresses the importance of entertainment to his project. Though he clearly states his own viewpoint in his performances, Lopez avers that his top priority—indeed his sole responsibility to his audience members—is that they are entertained, that they experience pleasure. But, as Jim Davis notes, “pleasure is multifaceted. It is contradictory and multivalent.”³² El Vez offers multiple pathways to pleasure; enjoyment might come from the visual spectacle, the lyrical content and stage banter, or the fun of witnessing a tight musical act. For instance, his shows feature rapid-fire costume changes, often involving tear-away pants that he rips off with bravado. In the fourth costume change of EV4P, he strutted on stage in a skin-tight gold lamé bell-bottomed jumpsuit and gold sunglasses, flanked by the Lovely Elvettes in matching attire. He performed the swagger of a rock star, showing off his well-toned body as the Elvettes (who really are lovely) fawned over him. Heightening this visual feast, he launched into an amped-up version of the traditional Mexican song, “Volver,” and the audience joyfully sang along. Then, vamping between songs, candidate El Vez vowed to “return America to greatness where we are all gold Aztec gods,” a sly alteration of Trump’s “Make America Great Again.”³³ This critique overturned the ethno-nationalist, xenophobic rhetoric of the Trump campaign, suggesting that America’s true greatness came before European colonization, or perhaps presenting the possibility of a redemptive Chicanidad that turns all audience members, regardless of race, into indigenous deities. However, he rapidly moved on from such nostalgic looking back, stating, “Fuck the past, it’s over! But in the future, the streets will be paved in gold sequins.” Lopez stresses that his focus on entertainment allows him to layer multiple meanings on top of each other, in close succession. Rather than presenting a platform that one must accept or reject, he can instead plant “seeds for ideas.” He notes, “it’s not a crusade, I’m not thinking I can change the world with rock and roll, but I can put something into a different light or make them see something in a way they didn’t think before.”³⁴

Lopez’s ability to speak out against racism while foregrounding his own racialized body is further facilitated by his engagement with the popular. In El Vez shows, pop culture both houses his critiques and offers the possibility of connection. As Leon E. Wynter notes in *American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business, and the End of White America*, “Whatever is distinctly American yet somehow universally appealing in our most immortal works of popular culture flows from the alchemy of racial amalgamation peculiar to the United States.”³⁵ The mass appeal of popular culture is in fact grounded in the racial mixing at its core. Thus, though pop culture *seems* to be ideologically neutral, it in fact functions as an interchange in which culture, race, and racial identity are negotiated. And yet the shared references of pop culture allow for everyone to partake in the exchange. States Habel-Pallán, Lopez is “a transculturator of popular culture” whose performances enable “multiple layers of cultural hybridity and [promote] complex instances of cross-cultural translation.”³⁶ For example, the show began as an old-timey recording of “God Bless America” played. The Memphis Mariachis took the stage wearing white shirts, red bow ties, and straw boaters. These familiar aural and visual cues playfully evoked the mythic electoral past, and the hopeful promise of democracy it suggests. Yet this is the past with a signal difference: labelled Mariachis, this version of the United States had a Chicanx flair that grew more

pronounced as the show went on. By marking the show as raced while also expertly performing the songs (and the role of the rock star), El Vez calls attention to undeniable racial exchange that occurs on the level of the popular in our nation.

No one looms larger on the pop culture landscape, or is more fraught with racial baggage, than Elvis, reminding us that the racial antagonism at play during the 2016 election is neither new nor remarkable in US history. Lopez uses the iconicity of Elvis to discuss the complicated racial discourses to which the King is already bound while deconstructing these same tropes. He foregrounds his own brown body, and through Elvis' linkage to black music also aurally calls up blackness. Simultaneously, Lopez-as-El-Vez wears the whiteness of Elvis, marking its privilege. Again, this affords layers of meanings to emerge. If one believes that Elvis was a white thief of black culture, then El Vez is the Chicano trickster who is stealing it back, drawing attention to the racial politics that enabled this theft and granted Elvis superstardom while blocking access to other artists of colour. On the other hand, if one believes that Elvis was a truly charismatic performer deserving of his superstardom, then El Vez celebrates that legend through impersonation. Moreover, he asserts an equality of access to this icon by showing that the King is not solely a white hero: Elvis belongs to everyone. In fact, by revealing how Elvis borrowed from other cultures—how he in fact came from everyone—and by performing a similar borrowing back, El Vez unpacks the icon, revealing the multiplicity of cultural traditions at play and marking each as distinct, and yet compatible. Through El Vez, Elvis becomes a conduit for the inclusion of all identities.

The extreme performativity of El Vez further enables Lopez to safely voice social critiques and offer direct rebuttals of current political discourse without provoking a negative response. The bold inauthenticity of his character, enhanced by Lopez's quick wit and reinforced by costuming and performance conventions, allows him leeway to speak a certain truth. Much like a jester, we know this is a performed character, but we also recognize the wisdom embedded in his joking stage banter and grant him permission to state outspoken opinions. Throughout EV4P, he called out the racist rhetoric and actions of Trump and his supporters, even proclaiming, "I am getting mad and full of rage!" and proclaiming that he would "build that wall—a wall around Donald Trump." Such a frank assertion of frustration and anger can often provoke aggression on the part of whites. Yet it is difficult to feel threatened by a character who has stripped down to red, white, and blue hot pants, all while beautifully singing familiar melodies. Instead, the sizeable crowd cheered, clapped, and danced along with El Vez. After a song about the mythical Aztec homeland Aztlán, he advocated "taking it back and giving to Chicanos 40 mules and a tortilla." The audience roared, more amused by the humorous (and highly impractical) reworking of the never-delivered promise of Reconstruction than frightened by the call for a retaking of the Southwest. Similarly, when leading the audience in the sort of call-and-response moments common to rock concerts, El Vez racially singled out the white audience members—"This time, only the gringos!"—the audience enthusiastically played their role by singing along. El Vez responded, with a wink to the Lovely

Elvettes, “Oh, I think they’ve got something to prove,” yet still welcomed them to join his coalition.³⁷

If the festive performance conventions of the rock concert, which favour celebrating, dancing, and singing along, aid Lopez’s pointed interventions, the sonic landscape of an El Vez concert adds further complexity to the message he crafts. In listening to El Vez, the audience experiences a new aural configuration—one that Lopez has carefully curated to be a space of inclusivity. Lopez purposefully mixes genre throughout his shows, placing next to each other soul, rap, glam, rock, punk, jazz, and Elvis. Since the early days of the recording industry, musical genre has been tied to race. Notes scholar David Brackett, “musical genres participate in the circulation of social connotations that pass between musicians, fans, critics, music-industry magnates and employees.”³⁸ Specifically, the construction of racially marked musical genres supports the notion that musical expression is rooted in essentialised racial difference, thus “black music” is inherently and indisputably different from “white music” or “Latinx music.” Racially coded musical genres suggest that we can hear race. By effortlessly sliding between these genres during a single song and over the length of the show,³⁹ Lopez actively resists essentialised understandings of sound and genre. Moreover, his mashups also offer social commentary through their lyrical content. For instance, towards the end of the set, he wove together “Mexican Can”—his version of R & B singer Lee Dorsey’s “Yes We Can Can” (which, he noted, recalls Obama’s campaign slogan, but was Cesar Chavez’s motto long before 2008)—with Bob Dylan’s gospel-rock “Gotta Serve Somebody.”⁴⁰ The music shows the connection between disparate genres while the lyrics make evident that too many politicians are bought and sold. As a counterpoint, both to the undue influence of monied special interests in our government as well as the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the Trump campaign, El Vez notes that “We’ve got to make this land a better land / ... / We’ve got to help each man be a Mexican / With the power that they give.” It is precisely through the vilified immigrant other, the song posits, that the United States can be redeemed.

Lopez’s radical inclusion engenders what scholar Josh D. Kun calls identificatory contact-zones, “sonic and social spaces where disparate identity-formations, cultures, *and* geographies historically chartered separately, are allowed to interact with each other as well as enter into relationships whose consequences for cultural identification are never predetermined.”⁴¹ Without erasing different traditions and specificities, Lopez joins together disparate songs in exciting combinations to create a sonic landscape that defies differentiating boundaries. Lopez’s musicality crafts a progressive social space, creating what Kun dubs:

audiotopias ... sonic spaces of effective utopian longings where several sites normally deemed incompatible are brought together not only in the space of a particular piece of music itself, but in the production of social space and mapping of geographical space that music makes possible as well.⁴²

The audiotopia of an El Vez show is its own political statement, one that revels in difference by offering a vision of amalgamated collectivity. As contact-zone, the

audiotopia differs from other political utopias by enabling a radical inclusivity. Moreover, this audioscape is made material through the diverse audiences that attend his performances.⁴³ As cultural theorist Jody Berland notes, “Much of the time we are not simply listeners to sound, but occupants of spaces for listening who, by being there, help produce definite meaning and effects.”⁴⁴ Thus the audience members in fact engender and embody this new community; the meanings of the songs and the space physically manifest in the individuals present, such that being in the audience can subtly shift one’s understanding.

The ability to bring a diverse audience together should not be undervalued, especially during one of the most contentious and polarizing elections of our history. In his essay “Deep Stories of the Demonized: Empathy and Trump Evangelicals,” John Fletcher parses philosopher Carl Schmitt and Chantal Mouffe to track how the political is defined by “deep, irreconcilable antagonism between parties who pose existential threats to one another;” however (at least in politics), “agonistic victories are never absolute ... opponents are neither annihilated nor exiled.”⁴⁵ Strikingly, though, he notes that political utopias on both sides—those evoked through campaign rallies, activist events, and, most importantly, electoral victories—are “ideologically exclusive; they are for the us, the friends, alone.”⁴⁶ These sorts of utopias are vital and necessary; they affirm our deeply-held beliefs and our cultural, social, and political imperatives.⁴⁷ However, just as we must assert our own positions, we must also engage in dialogue. As we invest more and more in our political utopias, we run the risk of losing the ability to connect with those we oppose, to see them as fellow humans and citizens rather than as utterly incompatible political enemies. Instead, Fletcher advocates not solely for utopia, but also for what John Paul Lederach calls “moral imagination,” a “form of non-cynical pessimism,” that acknowledges ingrained injustice and ongoing conflict, yet also envisions new realities of coexistence.⁴⁸ The contact-zone of an El Vez audiotopia provides this needed space of social and political empathy.

EV4P points to the vital role popular entertainment can play in fostering this moral imagination through the contact-zone audiotopia El Vez engenders. By staging a pointedly racialized performance, Lopez-as-El-Vez uses Chicanidad to destabilize racial ideologies of exclusion. With an emphasis on finding pleasure through spectacle and humour, he is able to confound the defensive moves of white fragility. This allows him to use the common terrain of pop culture to voice social and political critiques that resist Trump’s authoritarian tendencies and disrupt the racial injustice of white supremacy. Finally, the aural landscape and the social conventions of rock performance allow a community of imagination to coalesce. Audience members physically share the concert space, dancing, singing, and laughing together. El Vez’s performances in fact construct a highly inclusive social space, a moral imagination that offers a glimpse of how the United States might function differently. In performance, El Vez allows Lopez to put racial specificity next to inclusivity, difference next to unity. It is not post-racial, yet it envisions how a more productive, racially-conscious anti-racism might be practiced.

¹ El Vez. *El Vez 4 Prez*. San Diego Taco Fest, 21 March 2016. All quotes and lyrics cited in the text come from this performance.

² Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3:3 (2011): 54.

³ Though Lopez self-identifies as Chicano, as El Vez—in performance, interviews, and various published writing such as liner notes and web pages—he generally uses the term Latino over Chicano. Lopez notes, "...the modern kids don't use the term [Chicano] much ... Latino is more inclusive a term" (personal email, 20 October 2014). Within the lyrics of his songs, he uses a plethora of identity markers: Chicano/a, Latino/a, Mexican-American, Mexican, Zapatista, La Raza, etc. He refuses to claim one term as preferential to the other and thereby allows his audience members the opportunity to self-identify as they choose. For this essay, I have chosen to use the term Chicanx (marking the more recent non-gendered progression of the term), to reflect the strong Chicanx culture of San Diego and its proximity to the Mexican border.

⁴ DiAngelo, "White Fragility," 56.

⁵ Faedra Chatard Carpenter, *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 9.

⁶ DiAngelo, "Why Can't We All Just Be Individuals?: Countering the Discourse of Individualism in Anti-Racist Education," *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 6(1), Article 4 (2010): 1-24.

⁷ DiAngelo, "White Fragility," 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹ Before publication, this defence-becomes-offense manifested in violent form when #UniteTheRight protesters, a mostly male mob of alt-right, KKK, and neo-Nazis, descended on Charlottesville, VA, purportedly to protest the city's planned removal of Confederate statues. Their presence was highly threatening (many carried guns, shields, and other makeshift weaponry), especially when they staged a torchlight march through the UVA campus to surround counter-protesters at the Robert E. Lee statue. The next day saw a man drive his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, injuring at least 19 and killing Heather Heyer. Though outside the scope of this article, this event, and Trump's unwillingness to condemn the white supremacists outright, supports the claim that his election represents, at least to a segment of his voters, a validation of white supremacy.

¹⁰ DiAngelo, "White Fragility," 54.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹² Jamelle Bouie, "How Trump Happened," *Slate*, 13 March 2016, accessed 15 September 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/cover_story/2016/03/how_donald_trump_happened_racism_against_barack_obama.html.

¹³ Ta-Nehisi Coates, "My President Was Black," *The Atlantic*, January/February 2017, 50.

¹⁴ Trump often tweets these types of comments and repeats them in his campaign-style rallies and other speeches; evidence of his racially insensitive comments abounds.

¹⁵ Much of the foundational work on white fragility focuses specifically on anti-black racism, which of course varies in its sources and practices from other modes of racial oppression. However, I assert that the defensive moves of white fragility operate similarly when racial equilibrium is disturbed. Moreover, Obama came to stand for blackness as well as a broad coalition of people of colour and their white allies, all of whom might trigger the defensive reactions of white fragility.

¹⁶ Shelby Steele, "Obama's post-racial promise," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 November 2008, accessed 16 September 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/la-oe-steele5-2008nov05-story.html>.

¹⁷ Martell Teasley and David Ikard, "Barack Obama and the Politics of Race: The Myth of Post-racism in America," *Journal of Black Studies* 40:3 (Special Issue: Barack Obama's Improbably Election and the Question of Race and Racism in Contemporary America, January 2010): 413.

¹⁸ Michael Tesler and David O. Sears, *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

²¹ Coates, "My President Was Black," 61.

²² Of course, gender, sexism, and misogyny played an outsized role in the 2016 election, as many recent news items and research studies have documented (Rebecca Onion, "Bad News: We're Sexist," *Slate*, 7

June 2017; Mel Robbins, "Hillary Clinton Lost Because of Sexism, *CNN.com*, 3 May 2017; Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields, "The Impact of 'Modern Sexism' on the 2016 Presidential Election, *Diane D. Blair Center of Southern Politics and Society (University of Arkansas)*, June 2017). My focus remains on race and ethnicity, as these are the primary terms of engagement used by El Vez in performance, though he does express explicitly feminist views in his shows as well.

²³ The Pew Research Center reports that 58% of white voters supported Trump. These figures match other exit polling cited by various news outlets. Moreover, the impact of white votes in swing states was amplified through the processes of the Electoral College. As has been widely reported, the election was effectively determined by a small number of voters in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan; for instance, *The Washington Post* reported that a mere 107,000 votes for Trump in these three states earned him the electoral victory (Tim Meko, Denise Lu, and Lazaro Gamio, "How Trump Won the Presidency with Razor-Thin Margins in Swing States," *The Washington Post*, 11 November 2016, accessed 5 July 2017 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/2016-election/swing-state-margins/>). It is also worth noting that many Constitutional scholars have argued that the Electoral College is inextricably linked to white supremacy, as it was crafted (along with the 3/5 compromise) to protect the power of slave-holding states.

²⁴ It is important to note that the particulars of anti-black racism, anti-Latinx racism, anti-immigration/refugee policies, xenophobia, and white nativism are complex, specific, and varying. They are enacted differently, and carry different weight in different regions of the country and among different segments of the population. Yet white fragility is a common response to many different racial contexts. So, for instance, though popular movements rooted in racial specificity or multiracial coalitions such as Black Lives Matter, Fight for Fifteen, and No Ban, No Wall, each deal with specific issues through targeted action and all can trigger white fragility that seeks to devalue their importance and power. Trump's ability to give voice to feelings of white fragility effectively put him in office. Strikingly, he has maintained a balance through both his rhetoric and policy that has allowed him to retain the support of a wide gamut of white people, from alt-right white nationalists to presumably well-intentioned white people who condemn outright racism even as they benefit from white privilege.

²⁵ Coates, "My President Was Black," 106.

²⁶ Many scholars have included El Vez in their studies, usually exploring his work through the lens of Chicana Studies. See Michelle Habell-Pallán's chapter "Bridge Over Troubled Borders: The Transnational Appeal of Chicano Popular Music," cited below. Also see José David Saldívar, "Afterword: *Frontejas to El Vez*," *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 185-197, and Susan Larons, "Rock and Revolution: An Interview with el Vez, The Mexican Elvis," *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* (Vol. 1, 1997): 141-152.

²⁷ Michelle Habell-Pallán, *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 181.

²⁸ From the "About Taco Fest" featured on the Taco Fest website. Accessed 7 July 2017, <http://sdtacofest.com/about/> This quote is also displayed on the Taco Fest Facebook page and in several publicity blurbs.

²⁹ The 2017 edition, featuring different musical acts but following a similar structure, also sold out. The 2018 event planning is already underway.

³⁰ Though it is unwise to generalize about political affiliation of the individuals present, San Diego County follows a familiar pattern, with more densely populated urban districts voting Democrat and less populous suburbs voting Republican. Because Taco Fest was marketed throughout San Diego County, it is likely that there was a mix of voters at the event.

³¹ Importantly, much of the Chicanidad onstage is performed, rather than biological, though it is doubtful that the audience can discern this. Because race and ethnicity are based on phenotype, and visual markers are often unreliable, simply calling the performers Mariachis and Elvettes may convince the audience to read them all as Chicana. At this performance, only Lopez and Elvette Tiffany DeSena, are "PC"—Puro Chicano/a (a term he uses in performance). The rest of the band members/Elvettes are white.

³² Jim Davis, *Theatre & Entertainment* (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 79.

³³ In other 2016 EV4P shows, he would proclaim, "Make America Mexico Again!"

³⁴ Robert Lopez, email interview, 29 September 2005.

³⁵ Leon E. Wynter, *American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business, and the End of White Culture* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2002), 27.

³⁶ Habell-Pallán, *Loca Motion*, 183-4.

³⁷ Of course, some of the good-naturedness of the audience response surely is linked to the particular manifestation of whiteness in San Diego, and more specifically at Taco Fest. Moreover, it is important to note that whiteness is not a homogenous field. Whiteness in San Diego is very different from, say, whiteness in the rural Midwest or the Deep South. Given the context of Taco Fest, there was a strong likelihood that many white audience members shared Lopez's progressive political stance and were happy to laugh along with him. However, his tactical use of popular entertainment allows for him to connect with a variety of audiences in different configurations of whiteness. For instance, I witnessed a 2007 performance at Kansas State University where the student population jubilantly sang along to "Viva La Raza," and "Immigration Time," which suggests that he is able to sidestep white fragility even in more conservative locales like rural Kansas.

³⁸ David Brackett, "Questions of Genre in Black Popular Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 25:1/2 (Spring-Fall, 2005): 75.

³⁹ Most El Vez songs include the melodies of several songs; the main melodic strand will be interrupted with brief "samples" of a few measures of other songs, performed live by the Memphis Mariachis. He also embeds lyrical allusions to different songs within his pieces.

⁴⁰ Interestingly, this song was released on the album *Slow Train Coming*, after Dylan embraced born-again Christianity. It thus also speaks to the role of the evangelical community in national politics.

⁴¹ Josh D. Kun, "The Aural Border," *Theatre Journal* 52:1 (2000): 6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴³ El Vez audiences are not only racially diverse: my own anecdotal observations and interviews with attendees at different shows suggest that El Vez attendees vary widely in terms of age, sexual preference, religious affiliation, socioeconomic status, as well as more esoteric identifications such as personal style/aesthetic (e.g. punks, goths, etc.).

⁴⁴ Quoted in Kun, "The Aural Border," 5-6.

⁴⁵ John Fletcher, "Deep Stories of the Demonized: Empathy and Trump Evangelicals," *Performance Matters* 3.1 (2017): 96.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁷ Indeed, El Vez's highly adaptive format can also enact a more politically aligned utopia. In December of 2016, he performed a MeX-Mas set at the legendary San Diego club The Casbah, where he has played since throughout his career. This hometown event (Lopez grew up in the nearby suburb Chula Vista) played to a majority Chicanx, vocally anti-Trump audience. His lyrical rewrites included mentions of the dark political times, a warning of a "Christmas that's Reich," a condemnation of Trump and his named Cabinet Members/Advisors, a meditation on police violence, and a nod to protest movements as the Elvettes held up signs reading "You Matter," "Resist," and "I'm Still with Her." The show ended with El Vez building a wall (of wrapped gift boxes) between him and the audience as he commented on Trump's biggest campaign promise. In a raucous encore, he kicked down the wall to a thrashing version of "Feliz Navidad." The boxes were tossed around and the audience slam-danced in a frenzy. The effect was cathartic, invigorating, and self-affirming.

⁴⁸ Fletcher, "Deep Stories of the Demonized," 99.