Red State Wear Enters Blue Zones

Western, workwear and Realtree camo print are thriving in NYC and high fashion scenes.

By Erianne Lewis

Mary Louisa Cappelli wasn't thinking too much about it when she bought a red hat from her local canoe club with the words "Aloha Kamanahoku Klassic" in white lettering. But soon after, strangers were giving her weird looks. A neighbor crossed the street after seeing her in the hat. Then, while playing a harmless game of Live Ball Tennis, she became the hitting target. One painful blow knocked her sunglasses—and the red hat—straight off Cappelli's head, leaving her with a bruised black eye.

Shocked and confused by the incident, Cappelli, a researcher and former professor at the University of Southern California, started to realize that the hat was sending an unintentional and ill-received message. She lives in West Los Angeles, California, a neighborhood "where people turn red at the mere mention of Trump," she wrote in a recent op-ed titled "The Politics of Color." Such politics, Cappelli believes, garnered the extreme reaction from her neighbors: when they saw a red hat with white writing, they assumed that it must be Donald Trump paraphernalia. In reality, Cappelli bought the hat after a surfing competition. "Everyone thought the red one looked good on me, so I was like, 'Okay, I'll buy the red one," Cappelli says. Until recently, it was her favorite color.

Frustrated by this interaction—and the ones that preceded it—Cappelli questioned why it seems that Trump supporters practically have a "patent" on the color red. Cappelli considers herself an independent who sways left and right depending on the political issue. But now, she's hesitant to share who she is voting for in the upcoming election, given how people responded when she wore a hat that *barely* resembles the 'Make America Great Again' merch. This, she says, speaks to the polarized nature of our current political climate.

"It's a strange time that we're living in," Cappelli says."It's not just colors that people are getting freaked out about. It's any kind of symbol of politics."

Nearly 3,000 miles away, in another liberal metropolis, political uncertainty seems to have had a different effect on fashion. New York City is swarming with trends that may be associated with conservative ideals—all things camouflage, workwear, and American flags. It'd be nearly impossible to wander to Bushwick and not find a twenty-something-year-old NYC transplant DJ wearing a distressed Carhartt jacket. Or an off duty model pairing cowboy boots with boxer shorts and mini dresses.

Camouflage is the new black, it seems—even finding its way onto the official campaign merch hat from Kamala Harris and Tim Walz. Camo has long existed in "trendy" spaces but it is once again in the limelight—ironically defeating the purpose of its actual use.

The way New York-based stylist, Yvette Jordan, sees it, it's partially a product of function. The current camo print and workwear resurgence was likely reintroduced to the fashion space around the time of the pandemic. "People want to be more practical, they want items that are more durable," Jordan says.

Off the streets, a similar wave is happening in high fashion. In January, Louis Vuitton debuted a collection, designed by Pharrell, that was centered around the "Western workwear" look—complete with models decked out in cowboy boots, lookalike Carhartt jackets, and lots and lots of denim; even Levi Strauss would be uncomfortable.

Jessica Richards, a self-employed trend forecaster, who has been quoted in the likes of Vogue and Elle, told me that it's all part of a wave of "fucked up Americana trends" that are happening now. But such fashion trends don't emerge in a vacuum: "They come from a place that either expresses a need that we have in the culture or are a reaction to something that's happening," Richards says.

Richards sees the current trends, in part, as escapism from the anxiety surrounding the reality of the current political moment. Western wear evokes the original American dream—cowboys "going west," looking for gold, trying to depart from the old vanguard. "They didn't even know what they were going into," she says. "That feeling is remarkably similar to what's going on today: anything has to be better than this."

Before the Harris-Waltz camo hats came along, queer pop star Chappell Roan had ownership of that. The self-proclaimed Midwestern Princess released a line of merch that meshes burnt orange writing with Realtree camo—a brand name that is synonymous with popular prints like its "Advantage Classic Camo." It may seem ridiculous that a queer Gen Z icon would embrace the camo trend, but Richards thinks it's "clearly tongue-in-cheek." She sees it as Chappell Roan's ownership of "this is where I came from, but that's not who I relate to." As with almost everything related to Gen Z, it's ironic: a sarcastic co-opting of conservative signifiers by the exact people who are opposed to it.

Torri Weidinger, 24, is originally from St. Louis, MO—the same home state as Chappell Roan—but now resides in Brooklyn. She often styles her thrifted brown and white cowboy boots—from Buffalo Exchange *of course*—down with basketball shorts (perhaps in a micro trend final boss way), or sometimes up with two-piece suits and dresses. She thinks the irony in the styling is very "camp" and that "right now people are kind of taking those conservative clothing items back."

Although the camo jacket Jocelyn Williams, 30, was sporting the day I approached her in Washington Square Park was her father's army jacket, she still sees the less militaristic, Realtree camo print emerging in its own right, as *just* a pattern.

"I have yellow camo pants, or lots of camo hats that say unpatriotic things on them. It doesn't necessarily mean one to one, like government or patriotic loyalty anymore," Williams says. "It's coming out as its own pattern and less about what it used to mean."

Despite the new narratives forming around these historically conservative items and their embrace by a new generation, reclamation can only go so far. People aren't going to start wearing MAGA hats

ironically to take back the red hat, but Cappelli hopes to continue wearing hers, cautiously, to “foster dialogue, even if it seems futile at times,” she says. “When someone says something positive or negative, I seek out conversations with those willing to engage, trying to listen more and judge less.” So it seems that, for now, Trump supporters will continue their monopoly on red hats, but camo and cowboy boots belong to the young liberals—at least for the foreseeable future.