

Loud Mistakes: Fandom as Rhetorical Situation, Transcendent Apologia, and Taylor Swift's *Red*

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Abstract: Fandom is a rhetorical situation that should be of interest to feminist rhetorical scholars. Faced with difficult odds and significant scrutiny, many women in the public eye find themselves having to apologize, strongly linking apologia to popular feminist rhetorical work. As a case study, this article compares the content, distribution, and context of both *Red* and *Red (Taylor's Version)* to interrogate how Taylor Swift uses an apologia of transcendence in her re-recording as an attempt to move past her complicity in white patriarchal ideals. While Swift's apology can recount her individual feminist becoming, it cannot see past her privileged position to become an intersectional feminist model for liberation. However, because fandom often forces celebrity women into postures of apology, feminists-in-progress like Swift are left with few other rhetorical options. To make way for more productive celebrity feminist rhetorical acts, feminist rhetoricians should directly engage with popular culture discourse and purposefully shape the rhetorical situation of fandom through public-facing writing.

Keywords: [Taylor Swift](#); [apologia](#); [#MeToo](#); [pop culture](#); [fandom](#); [celebrity rhetoric](#)

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Feminist pedagogy is not supposed to stay in a classroom. Like bell hooks once stated in an interview, “Whether we’re talking about race or gender or class, popular culture is where the pedagogy is, it’s where the learning is” (hooks). This truth should point feminist rhetorical scholars to the world of popular culture—we have an interest in knowing what forms popular feminism takes and what rhetorical moves popular, even celebrity, feminists are using. In particular, this article takes up one of the most prominent pop culture figures, one of today’s most prolific rhetors, Taylor Swift, with the intent of analyzing how women in popular culture wield feminist rhetorics and, more broadly, how fandom functions as a rhetorical situation that shapes those rhetorical acts.

Feminist rhetoricians and scholars of other disciplines have long debated whether or not Swift is “feminist enough” and the value of celebrity feminism, including that of Roxane Gay and, more recently, Kim Hong Nguyen. These evaluations of Swift join the tradition of feminist rhetorical scholarship on women in popular culture, including Kimberly Fain’s recent work on Beyoncé. An as-of-yet understudied trait that Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, and countless other women share is that they perform their (often feminist) rhetorical acts within the specific context of fandom. Many elements of fandom and the people who engage with it (either as fans or celebrities) still face rampant “gendered gatekeeping and spreadable misogyny” (Scott 77). Fandom is a particularly difficult space to navigate when “Many women rhetors find that there is no comfortable ethos to employ if they want to shift the dominant discourse on a particular topic” because

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dominant discourses, like fandom, still want women to be silent and submissive (Ryan et al 2). Faced with difficult odds and significant scrutiny, many women in the public eye find themselves having to apologize, strongly linking apologia to popular feminist rhetorical work.

At the same time, fandom is an incredibly useful rhetorical space for feminist work. In her book *Feminist Fandom*, Briony Hannell argues that online fandom is an important expression of 4th wave feminism, which is itself marked by digital modes and a connection with popular culture. According to Hannell, feminist fandom helps participants (fans) make sense of feminism and make feminist sense of texts. Fans use feminist ideas to critique pop culture texts—but they also use pop culture texts to understand feminism itself. In other words, many people encounter and engage with feminism through popular culture alongside academic study (if such academic study is accessible to them at all). Engagement with popular culture is, increasingly, a pathway to a feminist identity (Hannell 28).

To explore how the rhetorical situation of fandom impacts feminist rhetorical acts, this article explores Taylor Swift's re-recording and re-release of her album *Red* as a case study where the rhetorical situation is especially highlighted. We will first look at Taylor Swift's original release of her album *Red* (2012), showing the links between her "authentic womanhood" ethos to female empowerment and validation, but also to whiteness and privilege. We will then move to the ways Swift uses the re-record of *Red (Taylor's Version)* (2021) as an apology for her participation in the harms of patriarchy by recontextualizing the album (and herself) as part of the #MeToo movement. In the context of fandom, Swift's feminist apologia rhetoric is able to narrate her own feminist becoming in potentially powerful ways, although the full impact is hindered by the commodification of Swift's apology.

(Taylor's Version) as a Feminist Project

In 2019, Taylor Swift announced that the master recordings of her first six albums had been sold by her former record label (Big Machine Records) without her knowledge, in an attempt to get her to return to the label. Almost immediately, Swift began casting the story in feminist terms. In a social media post, she likened the way record label officials treated her to that of gender-based aggression. She also writes, "When that man [Scott Borchetta: Swift's former manager] says 'Music has value,' he means its value is beholden to men who had no part in creating it," and that these are attempts at "Controlling a woman who didn't want to be associated with them" (Swift).

Swift announced she would re-record those older albums. She is now in the process of re-recording and releasing her first 6 albums under her new label (Universal Music Group), with the subtitle "Taylor's Version." Since Swift is replacing her old masters, she is purposefully attempting to make the new versions sound like the old ones. The "Taylor's Versions" add a few previously unreleased "vault tracks" to each album, but the bulk of the content is designed to be identical. In other words, the sonic experiences of listening to "I Knew You Were Trouble" and "I Knew You Were Trouble (Taylor's Version)" are the same. Still,

through this album, Taylor Swift is updating her own ethos and mythology by updating the texts and surrounding messages associated with her music—something Swift herself labels as a feminist project.

When Swift first released *Red* in 2012, she did not consider herself a feminist; she also developed an ethos of white womanhood, which relied on racist, patriarchal, classist assumptions about the world. In returning to her work years later, Swift—having now undergone a feminist awakening—felt the need to correct her ethos, not only for the ways it left her open to sexist attacks, but also for the ways her acceptance and continued association with this previous ethos left other, less privileged women open to similar (or in many cases more amplified) criticisms. Swift takes up a posture of apology that relies on transcendence, a strategy that helps rehabilitate her image as more feminist than before. But while Swift’s apology can recount her individual feminist becoming, it cannot move Swift beyond her white, upper-class, privileged position to become an intersectional feminist model for liberation.

The major elements of Swift’s ethos are well explored by Adriane Brown, whose research on Taylor Swift fan forums traces how Swift’s projection of “authenticity” and “relatability” function as a core element of her appeal. Swift’s fans celebrate the ways she takes seriously people, feelings, and ideas that are often dismissed or ridiculed. This was especially true when Swift began her career at the tender age of 16. Anyone can enjoy Swift’s music, but her ethos as an “authentic” American girl (now woman) makes her appeal stronger for women who see in Swift an affirmation that they matter, as they relate to her image and her lyrics.

Of course, Swift is no longer a 16-year-old girl singing about high school crushes. As she’s grown, her ethos has evolved and become arguably more complex—yet the foundation of “authentic womanhood” remains. Paul Théberge, for instance, explores in “Love and Business: Taylor Swift as Celebrity, Businesswoman, and Advocate” how Swift negotiates these different pillars of her ethos, concluding that she prioritizes her “pop star” persona (which Théberge links to authenticity and girlhood, in line with Brown) to the detriment of her success as a businesswoman or advocate. Increasingly since 2019, Swift has tried to play up her role as a feminist, LGBTQIA+ ally, and an industrious, professional woman through more political lyrics, statements on social media, and her documentary *Miss Americana*. However, Théberge argues that these elements of her ethos—relatable celebrity, passionate ally, and savvy businesswoman—are often in conflict and that Swift struggles (as anyone would) to balance them well. Indeed, studying Swift’s ethos involves studying multiple Taylor Swifts, as well as the ways those personas and roles are managed.

As scholars have engaged with those various “Taylors,” many have reflected upon Swift’s complicated relationship with feminism and feminist rhetorics. Swift now self-identifies as a feminist. While there is no reason to assume Swift’s feminist statements are insincere, and perfection is certainly not required to be a feminist, it is useful to unpack how Swift’s feminism does and does not speak to the current issues that non-famous feminists care most about. Swift also provides a useful case study for how feminist messages move through and are received by the general public. This is the exigency of Myles McNutt’s work that argues that Swift’s primary rhetorical move in her 1989 “voice memos” is to emphasize her roles as writer, creator,

and boss in the studio. She is centering herself as a woman in a male-dominated environment to claim the authority and space she has earned in a world that is not welcoming to women. This is an admirable move. Swift is, in fact, often quite vocal about defending herself as a songwriter. *Peitho* author Samira Grayson applauds this habit and positions it as a model other feminist writers might imitate, paving the way, too, for more scholars to take Swift seriously as an object of rhetoric and writing studies scholarship. However, McNutt questions the ultimate effectiveness of Swift's "girl power" messaging, since it does little to change larger systems. Swift holds on to and asserts the space she's worked hard to claim (and that is worthy work), but McNutt argues that she stops short of ensuring that those systems are changed to make it easier for others to succeed. It's worth noting that Paul Théberge's research on Swift's business, philanthropic, and activist efforts paints a much more complex picture. It would be impossible (and likely unhelpful) to deem Swift's feminism as either "good" or "bad." As with the rest of us, Swift's feminism remains in progress.

Therefore, it is not the goal of this paper to determine whether Swift has done "enough" in her feminism but to simply acknowledge that the feminist, rhetorical message that sticks most strongly in fandom is one that centers Swift—her authenticity, her true, now empowered, self. Melissa Avdeeff, similarly, makes the case that Swift's authenticity, which inherently centers herself, makes the activist work she is attempting to undertake more difficult. It is hard to elevate people with different, less privileged identities when Swift's own identity has, for so long, been the centerpiece of her public persona. In these ways, Swift's complicated relationship with feminism reflects a problem that persists in many strands of feminism. As Tracee L. Howell articulates, "There is no excuse for the fact that we white, mainstream feminists universalized the experience of being a woman, and so everything that followed, all the *theoria*, all the *praxis*, all of the activism, the fundamental fight, everything was necessarily framed to support the survival and flourishing of white women only" (Howell). In effect, everything is run through the filter of Swift's embodied identities, ensuring that her straight, white, able-bodied, upper-class, and otherwise privileged point of view is never really questioned, much less dismantled.

The literature reviewed above provides invaluable insight into Swift's ethos, and how her presentation of authenticity can be both empowering in some ways and alienating, even harmful, in others. This research sets the stage well for examining how Swift is returning to these texts and moments of her own past, seeking to update them. While she cannot rewrite the past, she is attempting to rewrite how people perceive her past, maybe even seeking to shift not only people's perceptions of her now, but her memory of how she was back then.

To promote this new view of self, Swift engages with apologia. In their foundational article, "They Spoke in Defense of Themselves," Ware and Linkugel identify four postures of apologia: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Apologia has become increasingly applied to online discourse and ethos formation, such as in Ramona Wheeler's work "Blogging in Defense of Themselves." In an exploration of The Chicks' public fall from grace that resulted from the band's remarks against then-President George W. Bush, Emil Towner makes the case that studies related to apologia can go beyond image restoration to "uncover the

rhetorical and social implications of a rhetor's words and actions," and this provides an exigency for studying a figure like Swift (294).

However, in the case of The Chicks¹ or other famous instances of apologia, there is usually one incident that, at least in the eyes of some audience, serves as an infraction and demands an apology. But Swift is not trying to correct a single public wrong or bounce back from one singular event. Her ethos developed slowly over time, under the influence of many voices. And over time, Swift came to understand that this ethos may perpetuate harm to women, including herself. The re-creation of her own identity explored here, then, is one of a woman who has matured, grown, and no longer feels that her public persona fits her values.

To correct her ethos, Swift leverages the re-release of her album *Red* to apologize for her complicity in patriarchy by way of transcendence, linking her old ethos and her current re-recording project to the #Me-Too movement.

Harms of Patriarchy & Swift's Complicity

At the time *Red* was released (2012), Swift had developed a powerful ethos. She was seen as "relatable" and "authentic." Along with Swift's picture of girlhood, however, came notions of chastity, innocence, and propriety. Brown notes that Swift's "average girl" ethos "constantly and implicitly privileges a vision of 'authentic' girlhood that is invested in whiteness, heterosexual monogamy and romance, and middle-class propriety and consumption" (162). Often presented as a foil to Miley Cyrus or other famous young women, Swift was seen as the more "proper" and "better" example of girlhood—*Vanity Fair* dubbed her the "anti-Lohan" (Brown; Sales). In evaluating the visuals of Taylor Swift's and Kanye West's respective 2010 VMA performances (ones that served as each artist's response to Kanye's infamous interruption of her acceptance speech a year prior), Shaun Cullen explores how Swift positions herself as an exemplar of white womanhood, drawing on imagery reminiscent of *Gone With The Wind*, concluding that her "performance suggests Swift's purity and authenticity" (Cullen 38). Brown summarizes, "Thus, while fans elevate Swift as a role model and strive to emulate her, this elevation is embedded in the cultural valuation of white femininity. Fans' explicit and implicit adherence to 'the Swiftian Way' requires girls to constantly maintain an image of proper girlhood" (176).

There is certainly a darker side to Swift's "All American Girl" image; in some ways, this public persona was harmful to Swift herself as well. It brought great scrutiny to her dating life. On the one hand, her willingness to write about love is what made her "authentic" and "relatable," but that same disclosure of her personal life left her vulnerable to ridicule when her relationships "failed." Openly writing about dating and relationships secured Swift's position as a relatable figure; however, this brought immense scrutiny along with accusations that she wasn't "chaste" or "pure" enough.

1 This band was formerly known as "The Dixie Chicks." Band members changed their name in 2020 to gain "[distance] from a name associated with the Confederate-era South" (Tsioulcas).

The ultimate result of this tension was that Taylor Swift's dating life became a national punchline for years. In a 2013 interview (one that reemerged in 2021 to significant criticism), Ellen DeGeneres presents Taylor with a bell and asks her to ring it when a photo of a man she dated is shown on screen. As Taylor grows more and more visibly uncomfortable, Ellen berates her for not playing along and accuses her of lying. In an unaired longer version, Swift begs "Stop it. Stop it. Stop" (Tannenbaum). Swift tries to explain her reasoning, "This is the one thing that I have, it's like the one shred of dignity that I have.... People go and make guesses about [who her songs are about] and the only thing that I have is like that one card" and "It makes me feel so bad about myself every time I come up here you put like a different dude up there on the screen, and it just makes me really question what I stand for as a human being" (Tannenbaum). Ellen and the audience laugh throughout the segment, suggesting that, yes, Taylor should feel bad. Chelsea Handler weighed in saying, "My theory about Taylor Swift is that she's a virgin, that everyone breaks up with her because they date her for two weeks and she's like, 'I'm not gonna do it.' [...] Every guy thinks they're going to devirginize her, and they're not. She's never going to get devirginized, ever, ever, ever, ever" (Johnson). Popular attitudes towards Swift at this time can best be summed up by a meme that circulated in various forms and is attributed to various sources that states "Taylor Swift should write a song called 'Maybe I'm the Problem.'"²

Swift was, of course, aware of all these jokes, along with the countless others that took on similar forms. In a 2013 *Vanity Fair* article, she presents her defense: "For a female to write about her feelings and then be portrayed as some clingy, insane, desperate girlfriend in need of making you marry her and have kids with her, I think that's taking something that potentially should be celebrated [...] and turning it and twisting it into something that is frankly a little sexist." (Sales). Even though the article admits she "has a point," the power of that critique is undone a bit by another quote from Swift that is left as the final word of the article: "I have my sanity button that I push. I push this button that's like 'Stop complaining, your life's great, stop, do not complain about this life, stop, this life is amaaaazing.' Sanity button" (Sales). In this exchange, Swift seems to agree with her detractors that to push back against the criticism she receives is insanity. That as payment (or punishment) for her success, she must be willing to submit to the version of herself the public has crafted, which means Swift, in developing an ethos of an "all-American girl" had to take the brunt of the ridicule most American girls face. Her most vulnerable feelings become "just another whiny breakup song," and Swift herself is simultaneously cast as a conniving seductress and a silly, naive innocent girl. She's caught between the madonna and the whore. Swift positioned herself as a representative, a voice, for girls and young women but ultimately complied with misogynistic ideas and chose to uphold patriarchal systems, even at the expense of her own comfort.

All of these interpretations of Swift's character swirl around and attach themselves to the album *Red*. The *AV Club's* review of the album includes this assessment: "*Red* is the next step toward putting those awkward teenage years behind her. Swift's last album, 2010's *Speak Now*, touched on a few adult issues; the

2 In 2022, Swift would release the song "Anti-Hero" which contains the lyrics "It's me. Hi. I'm the problem. It's me," seemingly as a response to the criticism.

fairy-tale-princess dreams of her first two albums were stored away along with—depending on how ‘Dear John’ should be interpreted—her virginity. With *Red*, she’s become even more unforgiving of the long trail of ex-boyfriends she’s left behind” (Gallucci). The fact that a major media outlet would find it acceptable to speculate about Swift’s virginity in a review of her music points poignantly to the fact that the discourse surrounding her music plays a significant role in shaping her work. *Red* has always been tied to her authentic womanhood ethos, and all the ways that women, then, are harmed by patriarchy.

Swift was simultaneously the victim and perpetrator of these sexist ideals. Without discounting the pain Swift endures, it is worth questioning how much more severe these messages and expectations might be for women who do not share Swift’s privilege, whiteness, straightness, able-bodiedness, or class status (at time of writing, Swift is a billionaire). Swift’s privilege, in many ways, impacts the severity and material consequences of the sexist messages leveled at her. Swift finds herself in the tension of deserving an apology but also needing to apologize for the ways these ideas about womanhood play themselves out.

Feminist Awakening

Swift was 23 when *Red* was released for the first time in 2012. That year, responding to *The Daily Beast* asking her if she considered herself a feminist, Swift explained, “I don’t really think about things as guys versus girls. I never have. I was raised by parents who brought me up to think if you work as hard as guys, you can go far in life” (Setoodeh). Two years later, though, Swift embraced a feminist identity saying, “As a teenager, I didn’t understand that saying you’re a feminist is just saying that you hope women and men will have equal rights and equal opportunities. What it seemed to me, the way it was phrased in culture and society, was that you hate men. And now, I think a lot of girls have had a feminist awakening because they understand what the word means. [...] I’ve been taking a feminist stance without actually saying so” (Thomas).

A few years later, in 2017, Taylor Swift appeared in court and entered into larger cultural conversations centered upon the #MeToo movement. Years prior, a radio DJ sexually assaulted Swift. She reported it, and he was fired—so *he* sued *her*. The court ultimately sided with Swift, and her compelling, blunt testimony made headlines across the country. She told *Time* for their #MeToo “Silence Breakers” issue, “My advice is that you not blame yourself and do not accept the blame others will try to place on you” (Dockterman).

In *Miss Americana*, the documentary about Swift, she connects her experiences with the sexual assault and subsequent trial to her belief that she needs to be “on the right side of history” and be more vocal about her politics, partly because “Something is different in my life—completely and unchangeably different—since the sexual assault trial last year. No man in my organization or in my family will understand what that was like” (Wilson 1:01:24-40). Putting these values into practice, Swift explicitly revealed her political beliefs in 2018, against the wishes of her management team and male family members. In an Instagram post, Swift aligned herself with the Democratic party and emphatically against Donald Trump. The post was a sensation; it resulted in 65,000 people registering to vote—many for the first time (McDermott). Swift’s music

and ethos have become entangled with her feminism and, specifically, her participation in #MeToo.

Transcendence & Apology

When Swift re-recorded and re-released *Red (Taylor's Version)* in 2021, both Swift's sense of self and the cultural landscape had shifted dramatically in the near decade since the release of *Red*. These changes happened slowly and in complex ways. An emerging feminism connected to #MeToo is among the most important shifts for Swift. When returning to *Red*, Swift recognized that she wasn't the same woman who originally released the album. Her public persona attached to the album no longer fit. The re-recording and re-release of *Red (Taylor's Version)* provided Swift with an opportunity to apologize. This apology takes the posture of transcendence. Ware and Linkugel write that transcendent apologies "take in any strategy which cognitively joins some fact, sentiment, object or relationship with some larger context within which the audience does not presently view that attribute" in a way that "moves the audience away from the particulars of the charge at hand in a direction toward some more abstract, general view of [the speaker's] character" (280). In Swift's case, she places her complicity with patriarchy in a new context of the #MeToo movement after her own experience with sexual assault.

In re-releasing the album *Red*, Swift has gone back in time to when her association with authentic white womanhood was strongest. She announced her re-recorded version of *Red (Taylor's Version)* by saying "Imagining your future might always take you on a detour back to the past." The re-recorded songs are faithful recreations that effectively replace the originals; *The New Yorker* called the new versions "indistinguishable" from the old (Battan). As she returned to *Red*, Swift did not change the songs themselves but the conversations and associations surrounding them, transforming them into a transcendent apologia.

Through recontextualizing and redistributing *Red*, Swift was able to recreate her ethos in more feminist ways, not by disowning her past but by implying that those more feminist, less problematic versions of herself were there all along. A posture of transcendence lets her apologize without admitting guilt or placing full blame on her younger self. She was simply held back and distorted by the sexist systems Swift found herself a part of—an iteration of patriarchal abuse that #MeToo seeks to call out. Now that Swift has grown and found more freedom, she can trace her more feminist views into her own past. Applying the work of Sara Ahmed to Taylor Swift, Monique McDade argues,

Feminist becoming begins when we return to past experiences, often violent experiences that we have suppressed or normalized out of self-preservation and find in them a harmony between what we sensed as the experience unfolded and what we know about it now after having accumulated many such experiences. [...] Taylor Swift's effort to re-record her first six albums is a "feminist becoming" as she literally reinhabits her sonic pasts. But Swift's unprecedented decision to rerecord the music she produced with Big Machine Records is also her move to reclaim a past that she did not have ownership of. (McDade)

This new version of *Red* is presented to fans as a fuller, more complete picture of the album, mirroring the fuller, more complete picture of herself and her character that Swift is also hoping to present.

Like all her albums, *Red (Taylor's Version)* includes a note from Taylor in the album liner. In it, she describes the album like so: "Musically and lyrically, *Red* resembled a heartbroken person. It was all over the place, a fractured mosaic of feelings that somehow all fit together in the end. Happy, free, confused, lonely, devastated, euphoric, wild, and tortured by memories past. [But] something was healed along the way. [...] This will be the first time you hear all 30 songs that were meant to go on *Red*." This introduction is labeled "prologue," which emphasizes the constructed, performative element of *Red (Taylor's Version)* and the version of Taylor's life that it presents. It is a reversal of the "authentic" diary-like representations of the original version. At the same time, though, Taylor posits that this version is the one that was "intended" all along, that just like the heart it represents, the original *Red* had been broken and only through the re-release becomes a "complete picture." And this picture, unequivocally, is Taylor's. It's Taylor's Version. Here, Swift is simultaneously communicating that the new version is the most honest, the most her and, paradoxically, it is also the most upfront about the inauthentic, constructed nature of Swift's work. Through this, Swift reclaims her own words—legally and symbolically—by attaching them to her name and disassociating her "authenticity" from its gendered, racial, heterosexist connotations (Cullen). By positioning the re-recordings as a reclamation project, Swift highlights that the original versions were not really hers. Those original albums—and the version of Swift that created and released them—existed under the control of men working in the music industry. Creating "Taylor's Versions" of her albums is about more than legal ownership, it is about Swift throwing off patriarchal control. Swift is primarily sorry, it seems, not for the harms her earlier ethos may have caused by becoming complicit with patriarchy but sorry that she was not able to be this free, this feminist, earlier.

This fuller picture of Swift displayed through *Red (Taylor's Version)* shows Swift as a more powerful, more feminist figure. To incentivize purchasing the albums, Swift includes 9 "vault songs" on *Taylor's Version*. The vault songs are songs she wrote back when she was writing for the original release of *Red*, songs she planned to include but ultimately removed under the advice of her record label. Two of them—"Better Man" and "Babe"—were given to other artists when they were cut from *Red*. Both were celebrated and award-winning. In reclaiming them now, Swift communicates that she is no longer letting other people tell her stories. Other people can no longer speak for her. Most of the vault songs do fill out the picture *Red* paints with more detail. Some of them were, perhaps, cut because they paint a more mature picture of Swift—"The Very First Night" discusses "nights at the hotel" spent with a new boyfriend. Or because they are more aggressive in tone—"I Bet You Think About Me" does not shy away from insulting an ex. "Nothing New" turns its gaze against gender roles and systemic patriarchal violence: "They tell you when you're young 'girls go out and have your fun.' Then they hunt and slay the ones who actually do it." The vault songs supplement *Red*, continuing its same themes, but with a stronger awareness of and pushback against her previous ethos.

The most talked about vault song is a longer version of an original *Red* track: "All Too Well." *Red (Taylor's Version)* includes a re-recorded version of "All Too Well" and a vault track "All Too Well (10 Minute

Version).” This longer version, previously unreleased, is the original version of the song Swift wrote for the album but had to cut down. The resurrected lyrics speak about power dynamics, age gaps, and gendered expectations and the role they played in the relationship falling apart: “I was never good at telling jokes, but the punchline goes, I’ll get older but your lovers stay my age.” In its expanded form, “All Too Well (10 Minute Version)” paints a very different picture of the breakup the song has always described. This song functions as a smaller iteration of what Swift is doing through *Red (Taylor’s Version)*; she is pulling back the curtain on what was edited out, cluing us into the whole story, which is one where gendered power dynamics and emotional manipulation held Swift back. This isn’t just the story of “All Too Well.” It is the story of Swift’s feminism.

On the cover of *Taylor’s Version*, Swift poses in a car’s driver’s seat: a place of literal control. This image resonates with Swift’s role as director for *Taylor’s Version*’s visuals. Prominently featured on all the album’s music videos is a title card that indicates the work is “Owned by Taylor Swift.” While promoting *Red (Taylor’s Version)*, Swift made appearances at NYU—where she received an honorary doctorate—and Tribeca Film Festival, where she was interviewed as a director of the short film “All Too Well: The Short Film.” She also appeared on late-night shows and *Saturday Night Live*, often performing the longer “All Too Well.” This redistribution elevates her work. Even though the themes of heartbreak stay the same (or are even expanded), “All Too Well” evolves from “another breakup song” to art worthy of serious discussion and acclaim. Swift comes away perceived as a serious player in the industry, one who is capable and savvy, because of her ability to shift the conversation. Even when the media did default to the “Taylor Swift dates too much” narrative, Swift dismissed them and this time did not take it back—saying in a Tweet “2010 called and it wants its lazy, deeply sexist joke back” (@taylorswift13). In pointing to the sexism at work in the media, Swift pushes readers to (re)consider *Red* as an artifact influenced by those same patriarchal forces: forces the new Swift is attempting to transcend.

Still, in returning to her past, Swift takes care not to dismiss or disparage herself. Instead of hiding or disowning her former ethos, Swift returns to and recreates those versions of herself, creating new links between her current more feminist ethos and who she was then. Swift presents her shift in ethos as one of discovery or unveiling. Swift has grown in confidence and regained ownership of her name, work, and ideas—literally and figuratively. Her apologia of transcendence communicates that she is sorry she was not able to do better back then. Operating now with more life experience and greater freedom from patriarchal control, this version of Swift, who has seemingly been repressed all along, can make herself known.

It would be a mistake to assume all of this is “mere” rhetoric, just for show or self-promotion. In fact, there is much about Taylor Swift’s life and work to admire from a feminist perspective. The truth is she has achieved marked success in a male-dominated space, while celebrating femininity. By all accounts, she is generous. She donated to local food banks during every stop of the Eras Tour. When the first leg of that tour wrapped, she gave every crew member, cast member, and truck driver a \$100,000 bonus. As she puts together a cast of background singers and dancers, she seems to be making more concentrated efforts to represent

more diversity in terms of gender, race, age, and body size. In 2023, she cast a trans man as the romantic lead in her music video for “Lavender Haze.” She regularly posts about the importance of voting and directs people to voting registration information. She used her music video for “You Need To Calm Down” and the VMA acceptance speech for it to rally people to sign a petition asking the Trump administration to pass the Equality Act. While less visible, her greatest acts of activism are perhaps within the music industry. It is because Swift kept her music off Spotify and Apple Music for so long that all artists now receive payment for streams during listeners’ free trial periods.

Limitations of Swift’s Apologia Rhetoric

While her recent actions build a case for Swift’s feminism-in-action, its limitations must be noted. As a privileged white woman, Swift has considerable blinders. In 2015, Nicki Minaj tweeted disappointment at not being nominated for Video of the Year at the VMAs, an award Swift was nominated for. Minaj expressed a belief that only “other girls” with “slim bodies” are ever recognized by the media and pointed toward misogynoir often exhibited by the media. Swift, assuming Minaj was calling her out personally, tweeted, “I’ve done nothing but love & support you. It’s unlike you to pit women against each other. Maybe one of the men took your slot.” The media, adhering very much to what Minaj accused them of, began construing Minaj as an angry woman attacking Swift and “playing the race card” (Lipshutz). Without an intersectional understanding of oppression, Swift was unable to understand the nuances of Minaj’s critique (which was a critique of the media, not even of Swift, as she pointed out). To her credit, as Minaj responded and clarified both in tweets to Swift and in media comments (something Minaj should not have had to do), Swift listened. She ultimately tweeted, “I thought I was being called out. I missed the point, I misunderstood, then misspoke. I’m sorry, Nicki” (Feeney). Since then, it appears as if the two women have become friends, as they frequently reference each other on social media and in acceptance speeches, noting their support for each other. Swift’s feminism is in progress, and it is admirable that she seems to be open to correction and learning.

Swift has positioned *Red (Taylor’s Version)* as part of her feminist becoming process, as evidence of what she’s learned about feminism so far. In re-releasing this album, she has updated its presentation and context, arguing through apology that she can only now reveal the full, more feminist picture of it—and of herself. Specifically, Swift’s connection to the #MeToo movement provides her with the reasoning for why she was not this feminist until now. Her participation in patriarchy was itself an act of patriarchal oppression. Her own complicity is recast as an act of abuse against her; male figures (her record label, her abuser) created that complicit version of her. In attaching *Red (Taylor’s Version)* to #MeToo, Swift attempts to transcend her earlier ethos.

This rhetorical strategy is successful to a degree. Swift is mostly effective at changing the narrative around herself. She is seen now as powerful, serious, and—to many people—someone who works for the greater good. However, Swift’s posture of apologia recognizes that Swift was not just hurt by patriarchy; she hurt others (especially less privileged women) through her complicity with and promotion of white patriar-

chal, classist ideals. Her apologia of transcendence, linking her re-recordings to her connection to #MeToo, primarily pursues absolution over accountability. As it tries to make amends for centering a narrow white, upper-class, privileged view of women, Swift's apologia approach runs the risk of merely repeating those mistakes, making Swift's own personal comfort the point of her apology. In fact, Swift's apology might be seen to function as a form of what Pritha Prasad and Louis M. Maraj term "benevolent gaslighting," which is "the tendency to eschew blame through a rewriting of history" (323). Swift can recount her personal experience of feminist becoming, but her apology does little to free *others* from patriarchy once filtered through the mechanism of her public persona and its vested interests (though not necessarily Taylor's personal interest) in upholding current social hierarchies.

It is useful, at this point, to separate out Taylor Swift—the real human being—and Taylor Swift—the performer, the corporate construction. There is a difference between Swift's real, embodied existence in this world and the ways patriarchy, #MeToo, and feminism have influenced her and the way her accounts of such things are woven into her public persona. There is no reason to doubt Swift's accounts of her growing feminist awareness, her dedication to feminist causes, and her commitment to learning and doing better. In fact, hers can be a powerful act of feminist storytelling. That feminist messaging grows weaker when transferred onto Swift's public persona, which may be more feminist but is still limited in important ways. This is because Swift's public persona is a construction of corporate interests. Unlike the living, breathing Swift, those corporate interests cannot really unlearn classism, racism, ableism, or sexism, as systems of oppression are inherent to them. They can only appropriate feminist language, commodifying feminist storytelling.

"All Too Well (10 Minute Version)" is a great example of this. One line reads "You were tossing me the car keys. 'Fuck the patriarchy' keychain on the ground." In context, this can be read as Swift critiquing her then-boyfriend's outward alignment with feminism by buying keychains bearing feminist slogans while he himself exploits power and age differences between them to make Swift feel inferior and dependent upon him. It *could* be a critique of commercial feminism, a lesson Swift—the person—learned about the disconnect between popular feminist slogans and merchandising and real commitment to gender equality. As this message moves into her public persona, it becomes commercialized. The official merchandise store for Taylor Swift is now selling "Fuck the Patriarchy" keychains. A fantastic example of missing the point. But one that is embraced by some fans and, apparently, sanctioned by Swift or at least her constructed public self.

This is, perhaps, the most dangerous part of Swift's associating her own feminist becoming with #MeToo. In doing so, Swift may be perpetuating what has been a major criticism of how the #MeToo movement has evolved and become more "official." Caroline Dadas summarizes, "Keeping #MeToo focused on white, cisgender, straight women is not only exclusionary to marginalized populations but also counterproductive to achieving the goals of the movement" (Dadas). As such an influential, high-profile figure, Swift's linking of herself to #MeToo may imply that the movement "belongs" to privileged white women like her, which does indeed betray the origins and goals of the movement. It is not wrong for Swift to have found

healing and solace within the movement; there is danger in her elevating herself as a primary or representative actor within it.

When Mistakes are Very Loud: Public-Facing Scholarship as Feminist Response

In 2019, Swift told *Vogue*, “It’s hard to know how to [advocate] without being so fearful of making a mistake that you just freeze. Because my mistakes are very loud. When I make a mistake, it echoes through the canyons of the world. It’s clickbait, and it’s a part of my life story, and it’s a part of my career arc” (Aguirre). While most of us do not have to contend with the intense spotlight and scrutiny Swift speaks of here, many of us can relate to a fear of making mistakes. Still, we recognize, as Swift does, that mistakes are inevitable in life. They are inevitable, too, in the process of stepping into a feminist consciousness and learning to detach from white patriarchal ways of thinking.

In this context, Swift shows us what’s at stake for feminists-in-progress, and fandom provides insight into a complex rhetorical situation that may require new and different rhetorical moves. Swift invites us to consider the extent to which the default posture for women in public (and fandom specifically) has become one of apology. The loudness of mistakes, which Swift speaks of, is one of fandom’s hallmarks, meaning that Swift is not the first and will not be the last celebrity feminist who undertakes apologia. Women, in particular, who are often cast as “interlopers,” will likely find themselves anticipating the need to apologize in order to remain active in fandom conversations at all (Scott 76). In fandom spaces—and indeed in much of public life—a woman’s mere presence is still seen by patriarchy as an affront in and of itself. Swift faces prejudices and patriarchal attitudes that cast her as wrong or deviant merely for existing in public, but she also faced more valid criticisms from feminists asking Swift to reckon more with her own complicity in upholding white patriarchal ideals. In all of these rhetorical contexts, competing camps expected Swift to apologize.

As a result, Swift’s apologia of transcendence has to do a tremendous amount of rhetorical work. It must recount Swift’s feminist becoming, reckon with her complicity, and seek to make a practical difference, moving feminism from theory to practice. Apology, while powerful, cannot do all of this at once, as Swift’s case shows.

Unless the rhetorical situation of fandom shifts in profound ways, feminist rhetorics in popular culture risks becoming largely defined by the only partially effective rhetorical tool of apologia. Fortunately, when feminist rhetorical scholars are engaged with popular culture, we can use our expertise to intervene; we can move beyond understanding the rhetorical situations women often work within and shape what those situations look like in the future.

To do so, feminist rhetoricians should not only embrace popular culture, especially fandom, as an area of study, but we should also actively work to shape those popular conversations by engaging in public-facing scholarship. In embracing new genres, methods of delivery or circulation, and audiences, public

writing can be both a tool of community building and resistance (Ryder). This makes it an especially useful tool for feminist rhetoricians because “there is no ‘authentic’ feminism that exists beyond its popular manifestations, and the popular itself remains a site of struggle over the meanings of feminism” (Hannell 6).

Feminist rhetorical scholars have an obligation to join this project of meaning-making. By writing not just about but also with and in sites of popular feminist discourse, we can provide more people—those who may never have the opportunity to sit in our classrooms—with pathways into stronger, more intersectional feminist identities. We should continue holding people accountable and calling them in, while affirming that their presence in the feminist project, and commitment to being better, doing better, and making communities better, is nothing to apologize for.

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