Leah Flettrich graduated summa cum laude from the University of Memphis in May 2023 with a bachelor's degree in English and a minor in Pre-Health Professions. She also earned Honors in English and University Honors with Thesis designations. As an avid Taylor Swift fan, Leah desired to research Swift's work, believing that it was worthy of the further interpretation that her previous works lacked. With the help of Dr. Donal Harris and Dr. Emily Skaja, Leah conducted research on Swift's album, *folklore*, for her Honors English Thesis. This thesis was awarded the "Best Thesis" award during her time at the University of Memphis, ultimately pushing Leah to submit her work to *QuaesitUM*. Although she has enjoyed her journey with English at the University of Memphis and is grateful for the opportunities she has been given, Leah plans to attend medical school in the future and enter the healthcare workforce.

Leah's paper received a *QuaesitUM* outstanding paper award.

Leah Flettrich
Taylor Swift, Pop Music, and the Creation of Modern Folklore

Faculty Sponsor
Dr. Donal Harris

Abstract

This article explores how Taylor Swift's album, *folklore*, engages with the history of folk traditions. Throughout *folklore*, which was released a few months into the COVID-19 lockdown, Swift embraces and alters elements of traditional folklore in order to present pop music as a modern kind of folk. In times of cultural transformation, like that of the COVID-19 pandemic, pop songs as folk offered Swift a means of managing the distress that came with lockdown, while also providing a way to connect with others experiencing similar feelings. In highlighting certain clusters of songs from the album, these familiar yet reinvented elements of folklore are brought to light, culminating in the argument that Swift's songwriting in *folklore* creates a contemporary version of traditional folklore, ultimately serving to create unity in isolation.

Introduction

In July of 2020, only four months into the national COVID-19 lockdown, Taylor Swift surprise-released *folklore*, a seventeen-track album written and recorded in the depths of isolation. In this collection of songs, Swift explores numerous storylines—some that are personal to herself, and others that are completely unrelated. In an Instagram post introducing the album, Swift says that "I found myself not only writing my own stories, but also writing about or from the perspective of people I've never met, people I've known, or those I wish I hadn't" (@taylorswift, 2020). Whereas Swift has previously been known to write about her personal life, *folklore* exhibits the star's sophisticated songwriting ability, as she elegantly recounts the individual stories of her cast of characters. While Swift's reputation as a writer hinges on the autobiographical content of her songs, the isolation of lockdown counterintuitively found her looking outward. At the very moment when she was mostly alone, her songs became populated with other people's stories, both real and imagined.

This Grammy-winning record is Swift's eighth studio album, as well as a major shift from her previous work. Prior to *folklore*, Swift had released four albums in the country genre, and then three more after making the complete transition into pop music. What critics praise on *folklore* is Swift's immensely matured songwriting—something that had been largely ignored in the past. While Rob Sheffield of *Rolling Stone* calls *folklore* Swift's "most audacious move, full of story-telling depth she's never come close to before," Jill Mapes of *Pitchfork* recognizes that Swift's "biggest strength is her storytelling, her well-honed songwriting craft meeting the vivid whimsy of her imagination." Before *folklore*, Swift's songwriting skill was generally overlooked, with more focus being put on her personal life, namely her romantic relationships, rather than her artistry. The musicologist Nate Sloan attributes this public obsession with Swift's personal life, rather than her artistry, to gender bias. In his article, "Taylor Swift and the Work of Songwriting," he writes, "gender and genre bias have clouded perception of Swift's particular skills and techniques . . . Swift has been continually undercut by critics who devalue her technique as either hyper-calculating or unconscious." So, when critics like Sheffield and Mapes recognize *folklore* as the epitome of her songwriting ability, it begs the question, "What is Swift really trying to do on *folklore*?"

This article argues that Swift borrows and modifies elements of traditional folklore, both its formal features and its status as a vessel of cultural knowledge, to present contemporary pop music as a new kind of folk.

Especially in times of cultural transition, such as the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, pop songs as folk for Swift offered a way to give structure to inexpressible trauma, and therefore to connect with others who also felt isolated, scared, and rudderless. In the song "seven," where she writes, "and just like a folk song / our love will be passed on," Swift makes it clear that this album thinks through how folk connects a community especially in a time of isolation (Swift, "seven"). After conducting my studies on the intricacies of folklore, and performing an in-depth content analysis of Swift's lyrics on the album, it became evident that while Swift does employ some of the features attributed to the folk tradition, she also twists these qualities to create something rather different, or modernized. Therefore, this article examines the way that Swift uses lyrics to explore and redefine the folk tradition. In order to bring these reimagined elements to light, this article is divided into three sections, with each one highlighting a certain cluster of songs that present a reinvented feature of traditional folklore to the attention of Swift's listeners. The first section discusses Swift's use of folk elements to telescope time, serving to connect people and time periods to each other. The second section revises the traditional folktale, highlighting Swift's modification of certain folk archetypes. Finally, the third section delves into a "folkloric way of processing," discussing the use of folklore to process certain situations or events. Ultimately, this analysis culminates in the argument that through her songwriting, Swift masterfully creates a modernized take on the traditional folklore that has been passed down for generations. By leaning on and reimagining certain elements of folklore, Swift presents pop music as a modern folk tradition, aiming to create unity in a time of complete isolation.

Folklore and the History of Folklore

Swift's turn to folklore as a means of articulating the anxieties surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent lockdown, becomes even richer when we consider scholarly accounts of the development of European folk traditions. During the 1800s, industrialization caused drastic changes to virtually every aspect of society, leading to individual and group struggles for those attempting to adapt. With science and technology rapidly advancing, new class structures beginning to emerge, and the development of nation-states creating new forms of political identity, complete social transformation became the new reality, and the want for grounding in shared culture became a more desperate need (Slobin 56). Particularly in Germany, which had been continuously fragmented into several states, this desire for unity became more apparent, leading to the term "volk"—a

word that translates to the people of a nation—becoming the basis for an understanding of German nationalism (Slobin 56). As the effects of industrialization began to manifest in America, a similar desire for shared community and a common purpose began to surface. As a result, William Thoms suggested the term "folk" as the English counterpart to the German "volk" in 1846. By proposing this new idea, Thoms also coined the term "folklore" as a way to describe the specific elements of a particular culture, whether it be customs, beliefs, stories, or anything in between (Slobin 57).

At the time of its coinage, the term "folklore" signaled the presence of an underlying conflict between the felt unity of pre-industrial social formations and the fragmentation that industrialization caused, and the term was used as a solution to solve the problem. In this particular case, folklore served as the mechanism for dealing with an identity crisis on the national level, and as an approach to managing the personal and group struggles of a society in turmoil (Slobin 56–7). In a sense, folklore represented a kind of nostalgia for a time before the extreme changes that industrialization introduced. In this way, Slobin sees folklore as a way to "get through individual and collective experiences," meaning that folklore acts as a strategy for coping with a certain situation, feeling, or encounter in a moment of crisis or uncertainty (19). More generally, folklore grows out of a cultural transformation, as it "signals, or emanates from, social experience" (Bronner 52). This becomes apparent in *folklore*, as we see Swift responding to the cultural and social transformations that the pandemic induced throughout her album.

While folklore's origins are in the nineteenth century, it is not only a historical genre. Often, folklore is considered to be bound to memories and histories of past communities; however, organizations such as the American Folklore Society see folklore as a living art form that preserves the culture or community of which it speaks, arguing that the crux of folklore lies in its ability to capture the identity of a culture or make sense of a certain time in the world (*What Is Folklore?*). In this way, folklore may be tied to the past, but it is also tethered to the present in the new traditions being established today (*What Is Folklore?*). Thus, folklore is a more elastic concept, as it can apply to any cultural form that serves to sustain the traditions, beliefs, or customs of a particular group of people. Similarly, Bronner describes how folklore manifests in today's technological world, saying that "people incorporate the symbolic and projective functions that folklore distinctively provides" by using the Internet to communicate with one another (22). This idea of folklore as a living genre—one that has a history but also continuously adapts to new cultural circumstances—be-

comes a critical lens in the analysis of Swift's *folklore*, as it permits the discussion of pop music as a kind of contemporary folk. As we will see in the later examination of the album, Swift leans on this element of folklore to process the drastic changes that the pandemic imposed and preserve the experiences and emotions of a society in isolation.

Folklore, then, can refer to both historical and modern artworks that attempt to represent a community's reaction to a felt crisis. However, it is also worth considering how folklore tends to follow particular plot structures, employ specific character types, and contain repeated formal elements, as Swift's album also draws on these features. A trademark of folklore is that it is dependent upon the transmission from person to person, ultimately allowing it to be preserved through time. Because of its reliance on oral tradition, however, folklore can be variable; because it inevitably changes over time, it is impossible to know the exact origin or true form of a single piece of folklore ("Literary Terms").

In terms of its structure, folklore has no set composition because it is dependent on the culture in which it was produced; in fact, it can take many forms, such as a folktale, a folk song, a dance, a belief, or even an oral expression ("Literary Terms"). For the sake of relevance to my discussion of Swift's album, I call greater attention to the conventions of folktales, and more specifically, fairytales. Folktales are fictional stories, and this genre encompasses a number of subcategories, such as the fairytale, the religious tale, and the humorous tale (Hansen). Folktales tend to follow simple plot lines, and fairytales are no exception. In fact, Marina Warner calls them "one-dimensional" with a "characteristic matter-of-fact manner" (25).

These stories characteristically begin with "once upon a time" and end in "happily ever after." Think of "Cinderella" or "Jack and the Beanstalk" and we see the familiar storyline appear; we are introduced to a protagonist who has to face some kind of obstacle, and after the protagonist overcomes the setback, he or she lives happily ever after (Hansen). These stories employ specific character types, like the hero or heroine and the villain, as well as other supporting character groups, such as adversaries and companions. Again, similar to how Warner describes the traditional fairytale, these characters are rather flat or uncomplicated; the hero or heroine is filled with good, virtuous qualities, while the villain seems to have solely undesirable traits ("Research and Course Guides: Fairy Tales"). As the story progresses and these characters interact with one another, folktales and fairytales alike often weave morals, lessons, or values throughout

the plot. By the end of the tale, the audience has gained an understanding of a greater issue that has been communicated to them through the story-telling (Warner 25). In *folklore*, Swift pulls from these typical elements of traditional folktales, not only implementing them into her lyrics, but also complicating certain features to create a more intricate story.

A final component to this discussion that is worth considering is the economic relationships behind folklore and Swift's *folklore*. Folklore is generally seen as a variable expression rooted in tradition, while popular culture and production is commercialized and more relevant to modern times (Bronner 36). In other words, traditional folklore and popular culture seem to be at odds with one another, rather than on a similar level for comparison. With that in mind, it seems that Swift's *folklore* completely goes against the ideals associated with traditional folklore. Swift's status as a major presence in the music industry undoubtedly raises some red flags when we try to see her album as contemporary folklore. More specifically, Swift's place in the pop music industry, where pop music is underwritten by and circulated through commercial music labels, seems to displace this traditional and organic community that surrounds folklore. In this way, the version of folklore that Swift creates throughout the album appears to be less an attempt at creating a meaningful folk tradition, and more a means to greater financial success.

An adjacent critical debate in cultural studies about the artistic viability of pop music can help us make greater sense of this aspect of Swift's *folklore*. In particular, I refer to the works of Adam Bradley and Michael Robbins, who each position pop music and poetry as related to one another, rather than as completely separate entities. Bradley focuses on the continuity across lyric creation through music and poetics, highlighting the artistic sophistication that comes with the formation of pop music. He also hones in on the idea that pop music is a kind of poetry that must be heard, rather than read, to obtain the full effects of its excellence. Robbins emphasizes the shared community that pop music and poetry both create, arguing that the two modes of expression are essential tools for understanding and appreciating life. We can see how this relates to our discussion of folklore. It was pointed out earlier that folklore has been centered around a want for shared community, which directly associates it with Robbins' standpoint on pop music and poetry. The contours of this debate, then, can help us see Swift's *folklore* as an album worthy of literary interpretation, as well as an album allowed to be compared to folklore.

It is also worth noting that the economics behind *folklore* are starkly different from any of Swift's previous albums. Swift's preceding albums were triumphs in the industry, but they were also major musical productions in terms of marketing tactics and the possibility of future tours; however, the COVID-19 pandemic completely upended these classic routines, causing *folklore* to be an entirely different album than any of Swift's previous ones, both stylistically and in the realm of production. Swift's *folklore* was a "surprise release," meaning that there was no public marketing or singles released before the album's arrival. In addition, the musical composition of *folklore* is wholly different than any of her previous albums. By applying the viewpoints of Bradley and Robbins, which focus on music and the community it creates, we are better equipped to see the ways that pop music can serve a similar role as folklore. Because both pop music and folklore can offer a shared set of stories for a given culture, it becomes more feasible to compare the qualities of Swift's *folklore* to those of traditional folklore on an equal level.

Folkloric Connections Through Time

In creating a contemporary folk tradition, Swift borrows and modifies elements of folklore to fashion a modernized take on the genre. As we have seen, folklore serves to unite and create community, and is developed in response to a felt crisis. Because of its place as an acknowledgement of social or cultural transformation, folklore is specific to a certain time or place. In this section, however, I discuss three songs that use these folk structures to layer the past onto the present and telescope time, creating an intergenerational continuity throughout each track.

In the case of "epiphany," Swift creates a link between two stories from completely different time periods, each of which deal with separate crises. Throughout the song, Swift discusses the impact of traumatic events—the kind of events that you can only bear witness to, but can never find the strength to speak about. Swift reveals that the inspiration for this song arose from researching her grandfather, a soldier who fought in the Battle of Guadalcanal in the 1940s (*folklore: The Long Pond Studio Sessions* 1:11:19–1:14:41). After uncovering the horrors that her grandfather likely witnessed during World War II, she connected these traumatic experiences to those of the medical professionals working through the COVID-19 pandemic. Swift illustrates this relationship in the parallel verse structure of "epiphany," as she compares the harrowing sight of a

soldier bleeding out to a woman suddenly declining in health while quarantined in a hospital: "crawling up the beaches now / 'sir, I think he's bleeding out' / and some things you just can't speak about / . . . / holds your hand through plastic now / 'doc, I think she's crashing out' / and some things you just can't speak about" (Swift, "epiphany"). At the end of each verse, when Swift deems these events as "things you just can't speak about," she highlights the anguish that comes with simply observing these instances take place. When we think about the historical context of these verses, we see Swift employing an intergenerational continuity throughout the song. While traditional folklore focuses on preserving a specific time, place, or event, the songwriting of "epiphany" spans decades, connecting entirely different instances that happened eighty years apart. In this way, Swift participates in the folkloric tradition of passing down stories to later generations, as she uses the repetition of the verses' final lines to create emotional links between the past and the present. Swift makes these connections to highlight the fact that trauma has a lasting effect on the individual experiencing it; in other words, trauma itself spans generations, just as the verses of the song do.

In the bridge of the song, Swift declares an epiphany as the only way of understanding and escaping these harsh realities: "only twenty minutes to sleep / but you dream of some epiphany / just one single glimpse of relief / to make some sense of what you've seen" (Swift, "epiphany"). Due to the repetition of the chorus after each respective verse, we can look at these lyrics in the sense that each character Swift imagines has a similar epiphany even though each person is experiencing an entirely different type of trauma; however, we have to wonder, what does this epiphany look like, and how does it bring comfort to each individual? I speculate that Swift draws on the aspect of folklore that represents a nostalgia for simpler times. In the context of the song, the epiphany is a twenty-minute dream that reminisces on a time before war, or a time before the pandemic, bringing the hope of a return to these times for each person. With these ideas in mind, we can see how the epiphany that each respective character has acts as a type of folklore in and of itself; although each individual endures a unique traumatic experience, the epiphany brings a similar kind of solace to each person even though the two characters are unrelated. In this way, the folklore in "epiphany" is not a concrete writing or expression that each generation can replicate; rather, it is a unifying experience that serves to connect the past to the present. In a context outside of this track, however, the epiphany is "epiphany" itself. In each experience that Swift relates, the lingering effect is that it isolates the person and renders them speechless, unable to talk about the trauma they have witnessed. "epipha-

ny," then, becomes an outlet of expression for this particular community, as the epiphany is the recognition of shared experience that comes with narrating these events, and this song gives a voice to these individuals that remain unable to articulate their trauma.

Whereas the verses of "epiphany" directly compare two separate historical moments, Swift narrates the life of a singular person throughout the entirety of "the last great american dynasty." In this track, Swift recounts the story of Rebekah Harkness, a recent divorcée that marries William "Bill" Harkness, the heir to the Standard Oil fortune (*folklore: The Long Pond Studio Sessions* 14:15–15:27). Swift incorporates a more narrative-like device in this song, as she chronicles the story of how Rebekah, and the outrageous parties she threw in her and Bill's Rhode Island mansion, called "Holiday House," did not quite fit in with society. In the chorus, Swift uses third-party gossip to narrate how high society viewed Rebekah's scandalous exploits: "and they said / 'there goes the last great American dynasty' / 'who knows if she never showed up what could've been' / 'there goes the maddest woman this town has ever seen' / 'she had a marvelous time ruinin' everything'" (Swift, "the last great american dynasty"). It is worth noting that by using gossip as the dialogue for this song, Swift points out how folklore can be corrupted; in this instance, oral tradition is transformed into gossip. At the conclusion of the song, Swift employs a plot twist to reveal that she bought the infamous "Holiday House" just fifty years after Rebekah gave it up, and this shift is supported in the final chorus of the song, as Swift alters the lyrics to place herself in the same situation as Rebekah: "and then it was bought by me / who knows if I never showed up what could've been / there goes the loudest woman this town has ever seen / I had a marvelous time ruinin' everything" (Swift, "the last great american dynasty").

In viewing these connections between Rebekah Harkness and Swift herself, we can see how "the last great american dynasty" is another example of how Swift's *folklore* spans decades, linking Rebekah, who was primarily active in the 1950s, to Swift in the twenty-first century. We can also see how Swift participates in the long-established folkloric tradition of passing down tales to the next generation. In a more literal sense, Swift uses this narrative songwriting to give an account of the Rebekah Harkness story, essentially employing the actual mechanism of oral tradition. In a more figurative sense, however, Swift creates an analogy between songs and buildings, both of which have the ability to outlive a singular lifetime. In this way, "Holiday House" itself acts as a symbol for folklore, as it serves to link the distant time periods in which Harkness and Swift

live, as well as their seemingly unconnected human lives. In this particular instance, folklore is a landmark that serves to couple the lives of Harkness and Swift, and on a larger scale, this track again serves to connect the past and the present, just as "epiphany" did.

Rather than connecting time periods or lifetimes, like "epiphany" and "the last great american dynasty" do, "the lakes," a bonus track to the album, links *folklore* to Romantic poetry, explicitly placing the album in a literary tradition. In this track, Swift discusses the historic tradition of poets, amongst other artists, retreating to the Lake District in England. Specifically, Swift alludes to the "Lake Poets," a group of English poets consisting of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Robert Southey, that fled to the Lake District, and lived there, during the 19th century. In her documentary, Swift reveals that she has had a similar "exit plan" tucked away in her mind since the beginning of her career; just as the "Lake Poets" retreated to the Lake District, Swift also had this idea for escape herself (*folklore: The Long Pond Studio Sessions* 1:38:35–1:41:46). In the verses of the song, Swift discloses the reasons for wanting to escape. The first verse reveals a desire to leave behind the world of modern technology, as well as the pressures that come with it: "I'm not cut out for all these cynical clones / these hunters with cell phones" (Swift, "the lakes"). Similarly, the second verse calls attention to the drama that has probed at Swift's career for years. As Swift communicates her wish to break free from this tension, she also cleverly inserts Wordsworth's name into the lyrics: "I've come too far to watch some namedropping sleaze / tell me what are my words worth" (Swift, "the lakes"). Swift's subtle inclusion of Wordsworth's name not only highlights the poetic history that surrounds the song, but also calls attention to the fact that this desire for escape has occurred before.

This Romantic impulse to escape culminates in the chorus of the song: "take me to the lakes where all the poets went to die / I don't belong, and my beloved neither do you / those Windermere peaks look like a perfect place to cry / I'm setting off, but not without my muse" (Swift, "the lakes"). Here, Swift mimics the themes of Romantic poetry; she wants to escape modern life and the turmoil that it involves. Thus, "the lakes" seems like an anti-folk song, as it centers around a turn away from community and a celebration of the individual. As the concluding track of the entire album, it is odd that Swift would seemingly undo the work of folklore that she has intermingled throughout the record. The last line of "the lakes," however, gives us a different view of this anti-folk attitude. Where-

as the previous choruses have ended in "I'm setting off, but not without my muse," the final chorus ends in "I'm setting off, but not without my muse / no, not without you" (Swift, "the lakes"). The line "not without my muse," that closes the previous choruses, presents Swift's retreat as an escape into art, as the partner she references is present only as personal inspiration. This would be the position of Romanticism, where others are seen as inspiration for one's own creativity. The shift in the final chorus to "no, not without you," however, changes our view of the song as a turn to the Romantic, making it seem like more of an invitation for her listeners to join on this escape. Swift's escape plan, then, includes us, her listeners, making "the lakes" more of a turn to folklore, as it encourages community. This lyrical shift also suggests that folklore is the artistic descendent of Romantic poetry. While Romantic poetry gives a voice to individuals wishing to escape modern life, folklore gives a voice to individuals with shared experiences; in the case of "the lakes," this experience is the common sense of desire to run away. While "the lakes" may seem like the opposite of folklore at first glance, the lyrical shift at the end of the song proves it to be the opposite, rendering it as more of an invitation for community, rather than a turn away into isolation.

Reinventing the Folktale

When *folklore* was first released, Swift revealed that there would be a collection of three songs that she deemed "The Teenage Love Triangle" trilogy. As fans have since discovered, and Swift herself has disclosed, the three songs that make up this triptych are "cardigan," "august," and "betty." What Swift does in these songs is explore a teenage love triangle from the perspectives of all three characters involved, with each view occurring at a different point in time. When listening through the album, it is not evident that these songs are connected, as Swift employs something of a double fragmentation; the three songs are physically fragmented on the album, as "cardigan," "august," and "betty" are tracks two, eight, and fourteen, respectively, and the love triangle itself is fragmented between three different perspectives. Within these songs, Swift creates a rather archetypal storyline: the boy dates a girl, the boy makes a mistake, then the boy tries to get the girl back. This generic style is similar to what we see in traditional folktales, namely fairytales, which tend to follow relatively straightforward plot lines and end in happily-ever-afters. In more deeply analyzing her trilogy of songs, however, we see Swift complicating the conventions of these traditional fairytales. By spreading the narrative

across three songs, each told from a different character, Swift modifies folk archetypes like "the hero," "the villain," and "the temptress," while also reshaping the structure of a traditional fairytale.

Swift's storyline contains three main characters: James, Betty, and the unnamed "other woman" that narrates "august." The basic plot line is this: James and Betty are in a high-school relationship when James goes away for the summer and cheats on Betty, leading to the demise of their relationship. "betty" is told from James' perspective directly after his summer affair when he returns to school. In "august," listeners receive the perspective of the girl involved in the summer fling, as she looks back on the relationship sometime after it occurred. Finally, "cardigan" is narrated by a much older version of Betty, who is reflecting on her first love and heartbreak—her young relationship with James.

If we consider the folk archetype of the hero vs. the villain, Betty is undoubtedly the hero of Swift's teenage love triangle, as she is the character that is seemingly wronged by the other two; however, Swift complicates this convention in "cardigan" by illustrating an older Betty reminiscing about her lost young love. The fact that Betty is much older than when her relationship with James occurred becomes evident at the beginning of the song, with the repetition of the lyric "when you are young, they assume you know nothing," already appearing twice within the first verse (Swift, "cardigan"). Because of its constant repetition throughout the track, Swift signals the importance of this lyric, highlighting the fact that young love is typically seen as fleeting or insignificant. In the choruses, however, Swift counters this attitude as she continuously inserts the line "I knew you" in her lyrics (Swift, "cardigan"). With the repetition of "I knew you" directly contrasting the recurrence of "when you are young, they assume you know nothing," we can see how Betty clashes with the stereotype that young lovers are naive. In fact, this idea culminates in the final verse of the song: "But I knew you'd linger like a tattoo kiss / I knew you'd haunt all of my what-ifs / the smell of smoke would hang around this long / 'cause I knew everything when I was young" (Swift, "cardigan"). In these lines, it becomes evident that Betty is the exception to this rule; she deeply knows about love and pain, and knows even more how the loss of her young love would affect her in the future. Even as Betty reflects on her past relationship years after its end, it still troubles her in the present. In the refrain of the song, however, Betty notes that the memories of her relationship with James are not all painful ones: "and when I felt like I was an old cardigan / under someone's bed / you put me on and said I was your favorite" (Swift, "cardigan"). Although Betty remains saddened by the end of her young

romance, she also still holds on to the more comforting emotions that came with her and James' relationship. In this way, we can see how Swift complicates the idea of a folk hero in her songwriting as Betty is still deeply broken, which is rather uncharacteristic of a traditional folk hero. After a folktale ends, we rarely hear about the repercussions of the events that they experienced, but in "cardigan," Swift gives us the means to contemplate this idea in Betty's particular situation; specifically, Swift highlights the traumatic effects of betrayal and loss. In this way, Swift provides a more realistic hero—one that may be flawed and haunted by the past, but is also rich in wisdom because of her experiences.

Similarly to "cardigan," the perspective related to us in "august" is narrated by an older version of the girl involved in James' summer affair. Because we know that the summer fling is in fact a cheating scandal, we can see how the folk archetype of "the temptress," or more modernly, "the other woman," comes into play. What Swift makes clear in "august," however, is that this stereotype is unsound for the narrator. This complication becomes most apparent in the bridge of the song, when the narrator reveals that she had true feelings for James: "back when we were still changin' for the better / wanting was enough / for me, it was enough / to live for the hope of it all / cancel plans just in case you'd call / and say, 'meet me behind the mall' / so much for summer love and saying 'us' / 'cause you weren't mine to lose" (Swift, "august"). In addition to having genuine affection for James, these lyrics also highlight the fact that the girl not only has hope that their relationship will continue after summer, but also that she wants it to. With these ideas in mind, we can see how Swift complicates "the temptress" archetype, as she provides a detailed look into the authentic emotions of someone who is actively harming another person; by doing so, she also makes our ideas of good and bad ambivalent. Swift even discusses this is in her documentary: "She seems like a bad girl, but really, she's not a bad girl. She's like, really a sensitive person who really fell for him . . . she thought they had something very real" (*folklore: The Long Pond Studio Sessions* 44:47–46:47). By taking Swift's own judgement into consideration, we can see how she obscures the idea of "the other woman;" although most would immediately regard the girl involved in the summer affair as a "home-wrecker," Swift gives her more credit, as she highlights the presence of her sincere feelings for James, ultimately making the intentions behind the summer fling more complex.

Unlike the other two songs of the trilogy, "betty" takes place within the same time as when the affair occurs—when James returns to school after summer ends. Listeners receive James' account of his summer fling

throughout this song, as well as his attempts to obtain Betty's forgiveness. "betty" takes the form of an apology, and if Swift were to abide by the conventions of a traditional fairytale, we would assume that James wins Betty back and they live happily ever after; however, this traditional happy ending is not what listeners receive in "betty." In the pre-chorus of the song, James immediately reveals his feelings of remorse when he says, "the worst thing that I ever did / was what I did to you" (Swift, "betty"). From the start of the song, we see James' guilt from the affair unfold. James further details this sense of regret in the bridge of the song, while also revealing his ever-present feelings for Betty while the fling was happening: "I was walking home on broken cobblestones / just thinking of you when she pulled up like / a figment of my worst intentions / she said 'James, get in, let's drive' / those days turned into nights / slept next to her, but / I dreamt of you all summer long" (Swift, "betty"). As James divulges the reason that the summer fling started, as well as the persistent feelings that he still had for Betty, we become inclined to think that the story might end happily with James and Betty salvaging their relationship. In the final chorus of the song, however, we see James' attempt to get Betty's forgiveness by showing up at her party and apologizing: "yeah, I showed up at your party / will you have me? / will you love me? / will you kiss me on the porch / in front of all your stupid friends? / if you kiss me, will it be just like I dreamed it? / will it patch your broken wings? / I'm only 17, I don't know anything / but I know I miss you" (Swift, "betty").

It is important to note that this final chorus has a musical key change in comparison to the other choruses, amplifying the emotional tension in the song. With this key change working in tandem with James' grand gesture, we would expect to receive a rather happy ending to the story, but Swift does not give us this resolution. Instead, James reminisces on a time when he and Betty were happy in their relationship in the outro of the song: "standing in your cardigan / kissin' in my car again / stopped at a streetlight / you know I miss you" (Swift, "betty"). These lines could be seen in the sense that Betty and James get back together; however, this does not appear to be the case, as the concluding line of the song is "you know I miss you," suggesting that, in the end, James still longs for his past relationship with Betty. With these ideas in mind, we can see how Swift complicates the structure of a traditional fairytale. While traditional fairytales tend to have a clear, happy ending, Swift concludes her fairytale ambiguously, ultimately revising its structure. In this way, Swift's folktale is more realistic for the actual situation that it details; relationships are more

complex than what contemporary fairytales portray, and unfortunately, more often than not, human stories do not result in a fairytale ending.

A "Folkloric Way of Processing"

In an interview with *Vulture*, Aaron Dessner, a member of the band The National and one of Swift's cowriters on *folklore*, calls the album a "folkloric way of processing" (Gerber). Because Dessner only provides us with this singular statement, we have to wonder what exactly he means by describing *folklore* in this way. Here, I turn to Helen Morales' book, *Antigone Rising: The Subversive Power of the Ancient Myths*, to help us make sense of Dessner's comment. Particularly, Morales discusses the staging of *Antigone* in Missouri as a response to the death of Michael Brown Jr., who was killed by a police officer in 2014. When wondering why *Antigone* would be used as a means of handling this tragedy, Morales concludes that "myth allows us to explore extreme situations without risking crassness of dramatizing the specific events," meaning that myth provides the distance that is necessary to see a traumatizing event or difficult situation through a wider lens, due to the absence of explicit details (8). Because myth gives us this agency, Morales says, myth in turn becomes "a way of thinking through complicated moral dilemmas;" in other words, Morales argues for a mythical way of processing, and I suggest a similar meaning for Dessner's "folkloric way of processing" (9).

Folklore for Dessner works like myth does for Morales. It abstracts out the specifics of something, ultimately allowing a certain degree of detachment from whatever situation we decide to apply to the folklore. Just as Morales' mythical way of processing permits the contemplation of a problem or difficult situation from a pulled-back perspective, folklore provides us with the same kind of mechanism for thought and reflection. Throughout *folklore*, we see Swift employing this technique, particularly in the songs that are not obviously connected to each other, as we have seen in the previous analyses. In this section, I focus on three songs, each of which discuss entirely different situations, that seem to demonstrate the embodiment of Dessner's "folkloric way of processing" most clearly. In these songs, we see Swift extracting major details from the event she discusses; instead of dwelling in the specifics of a problem, Swift uses poetic devices and narrative styles to provide an overarching look into the various situations she presents.

When discussing "my tears ricochet" with Jack Antonoff, one of Swift's collaborators on *folklore*, Antonoff says that the track has a "bird's

eye view quality . . . It's very pulled back and commenting on the whole experience of it" (*folklore: The Long Pond Studio Sessions* 26:40–28:50). While the rest of the album is keyed into specific details, like the names of the characters and full plot of "The Teenage Love Triangle Trilogy", "my tears ricochet" is extremely general in the sense that it lacks any major details. This difference in diction and specificity seems to be what Antonoff means in his comment, signaling its importance to this section.

In this track, Swift discusses the trauma of betrayal, using the metaphor of a funeral to relate a situation in which a person who deeply knows another becomes the individual who inflicts the most hurt; however, this comparison only becomes evident in the chorus of the song. Before this understanding comes to light, listeners have no indication of what Swift is discussing. Take the opening line of the song, for example: "we gather here" (Swift, "my tears ricochet"). This statement is typically used as an opening to various rituals, such as weddings or funerals, and the fact that she is referring to a funeral only becomes clear in the chorus when she says, "and if I'm dead to you, why are you at the wake?" (Swift, "my tears ricochet"). This ambiguity demonstrates a "folkloric way of processing"; because Swift is leaving out the details of this situation, making the exact event unknown to the listener, she allows an interpretive distance that would not be present if these specifics were included.

What Swift does give her listeners, however, is a mechanism of processing betrayal, ultimately implementing a "folkloric way of processing" throughout the song. This idea is seen in the changes between each chorus. In the first chorus, Swift depicts a hero that serves to maintain his or her own reputation, rather than rescue others: "and you're the hero flying around, saving face" (Swift, "my tears ricochet"). With this line in the first chorus, listeners receive the view of the betrayer as someone who is selfish, only caring about their own public perception. In the second chorus, however, Swift provides a look into the partnership before the betrayal occurred: "cause when I'd fight, you used to tell me I was brave" (Swift, "my tears ricochet"). Here, listeners see that the betrayer was an uplifting person at some point in the partnership. In the final chorus of the song, Swift provides a realization in regard to the situation. In the first line, we see an end to this issue: "I didn't have it in myself to go with grace / and so the battleships will sink beneath the waves" (Swift, "my tears ricochet"). Just as the battleships disappear into the ocean, the problem seemingly fades away. In the lines that follow, however, Swift gives us an interpretation of the betrayer's feelings, appearing to rationalize the act of betrayal and sympathize with the betrayer: "you had to kill me, but it killed you

just the same / cursing my name, wishing I stayed / you turned into your worst fears / and you're tossing out blame, drunk on this pain / crossing out the good years" (Swift, "my tears ricochet"). Specifically when she writes that the betrayer "had" to do whatever the betrayal was, we see how the deception is seemingly justified, along with the further indication that the same kind of suffering was felt by both parties. This idea is reiterated when Swift writes that the betrayer's accusations are vindicated by the all-encompassing agony that he or she felt. By giving her listeners this glimpse into the betrayer's emotions, Swift shows us how this situation is intricate and multifaceted, communicating the familiar message that there are multiple sides to every story.

Because she provides this overarching examination, Swift gives us an agency to processing betrayal. In the choruses, Swift goes from an angered view of the betrayer, to looking back on the positive qualities of someone that was once a companion, then finally accepting the fact that the partnership has ended, while beginning to empathize with the person that caused harm. Again, this takeaway would be impossible without Swift's choice to leave out the specifics of the betrayal she discusses. In providing this distance, Swift allows her listeners to apply the song to any set of circumstances, making it a more universal means of processing.

Similarly to "my tears ricochet," Swift uses a conceit in "mirrorball," as she compares celebrity and flawed individuals to a disco ball. However, rather than leaving out the details of a certain situation, and using a metaphor to relate the instance she discusses, Swift uses the disco ball conceit to view a specific situation in a different way throughout "mirrorball," again allowing an interpretive distance for her listeners. Swift begins the song with describing what a disco ball does; it glamorously shines, but only in the presence of an outside source of light. In the chorus, Swift reveals what happens when there is no longer a light being shone on the disco ball, and no one is entranced by it anymore: "when no one is around my dear / you'll find me on my tallest tiptoes / spinning in my highest heels, love / shining just for you" (Swift, "mirrorball"). Even when the disco ball is in the absence of light and no one is paying any attention to it, the disco ball is still up on a pedestal, performing the same function that it does in the presence of light. In her documentary, Swift explains that she experienced similar feelings during the pandemic; she knew that she could easily take a break from her stardom, but she found herself creating more music, still attempting to keep up her artistry (*folklore: The Long Pond Studio Sessions* 33:34–36:56). She also discusses a second aspect of this conceit, explaining that people tend to change who they are in order

to satisfy the expectations of others; however, just as the disco ball still shines when no one is around, people are still deeply broken when they are completely alone.

Swift addresses both components of her conceit in the bridge of the song: "and they called off the circus / burned the disco down / when they sent home the horses / and the rodeo clowns / I'm still on that tightrope / I'm still trying everything to get you laughing at me" (Swift, "mirrorball"). Here, Swift metaphorically speaks of the COVID-19 lockdown in the beginning of the bridge, describing how she has continued to make music even though she is unsure of her decision to do so. It is worth noting that Swift compares her own artistry to the likes of a circus, something typically seen as silly or trivial, ultimately setting a disconcerting tone in regard to her work. I suggest that this comparison mirrors her own feelings about creating music in isolation; in a time when there is an excuse to step back from your career, it seems frivolous to continue the work when it may amount to nothing. While these lyrics may seem more personal to Swift herself, they can be applied to the experiences of any artist in lockdown. In *folklore: The Long Pond Studio Sessions*, Antonoff comments on the gravity that these lyrics hold in regard to artists handling the isolation of lockdown: "It's not about the pandemic. It's about the experience of what happens to an artist when you're living through a pandemic. You start to dream" (33:34–36.56).

At the conclusion of the bridge, Swift touches on the other aspect of the conceit, highlighting the feeling of always having to try hard to please others, and emphasizing the emotions that come with simply enduring the human experience: "I'm still a believer but I don't know why / I've never been a natural / all I do is try, try, try / I'm still on that trapeze / I'm still trying everything / to keep you looking at me" (Swift, "mirrorball"). Again, these lyrics could relate to a number of individuals, as there are no specific details that point in a singular direction. Thus, the entirety of Swift's conceit in "mirrorball" can appeal to different groups of people; whether it be an artist struggling with the isolation and uncertainty of lockdown, or a person that is constantly battling individual insecurities, all can find solace in the lyrics of "mirrorball." By using this central conceit of the disco ball—a transposable conceit that has the ability to pertain to multiple situations—she allows the interpretive distance that is necessary to be included as a "folkloric way of processing."

While "my tears ricochet" and "mirrorball" employ poetic devices to extract details from particular situations, "seven" uses storytelling as

a way of processing. Throughout this track, we see Swift actually using the "folkloric way of processing" herself, rather than providing the necessary distance for her listeners to apply the lyrics to their own personal circumstances. "seven" acts as something of an ode to childhood, as Swift memorializes her own childhood throughout the song, reminiscing on the feelings of being explorative and innocent and questioning where our childhood tendencies go. However, "seven" also details the way that children process trauma, namely through imagination, and Swift pleads for us to return to this way of thinking. In the first verse of the song, Swift says, "please picture me / in the trees / I hit my peak at seven feet / in the swing / over the creek" (Swift, "seven"). The use of "please" in the opening line of the track suggests that Swift is begging us to see her in this childlike way. The next few lines contain memories of playing and swinging in the woods, but Swift uses a powerful lineation when she says "I hit my peak at seven feet." If we simply read the lyrics, it seems like she is referring to the action of swinging, but when we listen to the actual song, she pauses after the word "seven," indicating that she peaked at the age of seven, rather than at the height of the swing. This halt in the lyrics suggests that Swift sees this magical way of childhood thinking as the best version of herself, further urging her listeners to return to this way of processing.

This kind of thinking is described in the bridge of the song, as Swift discusses the weight of domestic abuse on a friend, and plans an escape so that the friend no longer has to endure this mistreatment: "and I've been meaning to tell you / I think your house is haunted / your dad is always mad and that must be why / and I think you should come live with / me and we can be pirates / then you won't have to cry" (Swift, "seven"). Swift emphasizes the naivety of childhood here, as she details how a child deals with this kind of trauma; the house must be haunted because the dad is mad, and if they leave to be pirates, they will not cry or be afraid. As I said, this childlike way of thinking seems to bring comfort to Swift; as a child, we do not fully understand the gravity of a certain situation, but as we age, these things start to make sense, causing us to feel a sense of guilt for not being equipped to help. So, returning to these events, and remembering them in the way that they happened, allows us to make sense of these instances.

In the chorus of the song, Swift implies that she has lost touch with this friend: "and though I can't recall your face / I still got love for you" (Swift, "seven"). The lines that follow contain one of the most important lyrics of the entire record: "and just like a folk song / our love will be passed on" (Swift, "seven"). Obviously, these lyrics allude to the title of

the album, and the workings of folklore throughout the record; however, we have to consider why Swift would blatantly speak of folklore in this particular song. I suggest that she means to communicate that folklore works within our individual lives. Throughout our lifetime, we tell and retell stories from childhood, or we frequently think about instances from our childhood as we grow up; in this way, we pass down folklore from our own childhood within the span of our lifetime. For Swift, this storytelling does not fix the situation she discusses; she does not prevent the abuse her friend experiences, and she does not maintain this friendship. Rather, the storytelling she employs in this song allows her to process these specific events from her childhood. Telling this story and returning to this way of processing gives her an agency to revitalize this friendship that so clearly meant something to her childhood, and make sense of other things that may have occurred during this time. In giving us this tribute to her own childhood, Swift provides an example of how this "folkloric way of processing" can be implemented into our own lives—through storytelling and returning to a childlike way of thinking.

Conclusion

This article, I hope, has provided an interesting lens with which we can view Swift's *folklore* as more than just an awarded musical album. In a time of confusion, isolation, and mystification of the modern world, Swift's elegant lyrical composition and powerful storytelling capabilities gave way to a means of comfort for so many. In investigating the nuances of traditional folklore, and thoroughly examining Swift's lyrical content on the album, the ways in which she redefines the folk tradition to present pop music as a contemporary kind of folk become clear, ultimately providing a fruitful approach to the album's analysis. From reinventing formal elements of traditional folklore to embracing features of its position as a cultural phenomenon, Swift effectively creates a modernized take on the folk tradition. Although her songwriting has generally been overlooked in the past, Swift's work on *folklore* has demonstrated how her lyrical content is worthy of further interpretation. What is still to be done, however, is the application of this lens to other frameworks, whether that be music, literature, or other forms of artistic creation. With such masterful creations continuously being made in the modern world, it is important that we continue to investigate them. Works of popular culture can sometimes be written off, but these creations deserve to be appreciated for what they are, as well as what they could be—even if it might not meet the eye at first glance.

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