

ERAS
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Although I did not see the Eras Tour live, watching the concert movie was a revelation for me. In particular, Taylor Swift's performance of "Our Song" from her 2006 debut album left me in awe. With a guitar slung over her shoulder, Swift welcomes the audience to the acoustic set of the concert and dedicates the song she wrote when she was fourteen, twenty years before her Eras Tour performance, to her fans:

When I dreamed up the idea of the Eras Tour, I thought it would be really fun to go back through all the different phases I've had musically, because it's been a little bit of everything. You've been so kind in letting me explore genres and step outside boxes that are created for us in the music industry. [...] It's so much fun to get to play, experiment, and grow as an artist. But I did want to play a song to thank the people who liked me when I was a little teenager writing songs for my ninth-grade talent show.¹

The performance of "Our Song" that follows is, like the rest of the show, glamorous and upbeat. But without dancers or a band backing her, the performance is also *raw*. Although Swift doesn't sing about "ridin' shotgun with [her] hair undone" with the same nasal twang she used to, looking out into the crowd, her gaze oozes sincerity.² Swift would never write something like it now, but she is proud of "Our Song." She does not distance herself from the work she did as a teenager. That's the point of the Eras Tour: not only to revisit but to *celebrate* the different phases of her musical career.

How can Swift embrace her teenage self so wholeheartedly? The thought of putting my past self's work on display for all to see is somewhat mortifying. Every few weeks, my teenage self—who had a strange obsession with broadcasting her trivial, cringe-inducing musings online—comes back to haunt me in the form of a Facebook Memory, reminding me that, for example, sixteen years ago I felt inclined to share with the world that "I'm not a perfect person/there's many things I wish I didn't do... Gotta love Hoobastank!" On a few occasions, I have gone through my social media history and deleted especially embarrassing posts. Obviously, there is a big difference between posting Hoobastank lyrics on Facebook and writing a charming, hook-laden song that continues to be beloved by millions. A person of any age should be proud to have written "Our Song." But Swift's eagerness to perform a song about a crush that she wrote when she was fourteen is pretty

¹ *Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour*, Documentary (AMC Theaters, 2023).

² Taylor Swift, "Our Song," *Taylor Swift* (Big Machine Records, 2006).

astounding. Unlike us, someone as famous as Swift does not have the luxury of scrolling through her past and deleting anything that makes her cringe. But rather than shy away from her past self and the experiences and concerns that motivated her songwriting, she eagerly returns to her previous musical phases. She embraces them as part of herself, as *eras*.

My aim in this paper is to use selections from Swift's discography to explore the idea of eras, the role they play in identity construction, and the challenge they pose for prevailing views about integrity and self-constitution. After providing an overview of Swift's eras and the notion of eras more broadly, I argue that eras present us with opportunities to *play* with identity, especially before we come to have a stable self-conception, to "try on" roles, values, and projects in the process of figuring out who we are. Next, I argue that eras push us to complicate the prevailing view that integrity requires maintaining a stable identity. I conclude by using my account of eras as a basis for reflection on the pervasiveness of past-directed embarrassment and the value in confronting it.

Taylor Swift's musical career is divided into distinct eras, named after each of her albums. Swift's eras inform all aspects of her musical and stylistic identity, from her sound and lyrics to her dress and social media presence. For example, Swift's *Speak Now* era marked her transition from teenage life (which she had explored during her *Debut* and *Fearless* eras) to young adulthood, infusing her previously established country sound with light elements of pop and rock. Lyrics in *Speak Now* touch on bullying and increasingly complicated romantic relationships, and during this era she wore sparkly, purple ensembles to create a whimsical, fairy-tale look.

To my understanding, the concept of "eras" was developed by Swifties, who have long used it to describe the distinct periods of Swift's career. Swift honored their use of the term by naming her 2023-2024 world tour the "Eras Tour." The concert's ambitious forty-four-song set list was divided into ten acts for her different eras. Swifties attended the concert dressed up in their favorite eras; for example, *Debut* Swifties wore cowboy boots and sundresses and *Midnight* Swifties sparkly, oversized t-shirts. Many Swifties interpreted "era" loosely. As an academic, I was partial to *Honorary Doctorate* era costumes, for which fans donned NYU's iconic purple regalia.

Recently, the concept of eras has gained traction outside of Swiftdom, becoming a mainstay of Gen-Z's conceptual repertoire. Roughly, when you say you're in some era, you indicate that something new is currently informing your behavior or style. For instance, if you're in your fitness era, you are uncharacteristically keen on going to the gym, or if you're in your single era, you are enjoying the freedom of being uncoupled

for the time being. Eras can get rather specific. People describe going through *wasting money* eras when their spending gets a bit out of hand, *yellow wallpaper* eras when they're in a DIY mood, and *gabagool* eras when they embrace their Italian-American heritage (or binge-watch *The Sopranos*).³ The way I have characterized eras might make them seem silly. Often, they are. However, eras also give us insight into how our identities develop and evolve over time.

The conception of identity at issue here is *practical*; it concerns the parts of us that give us reasons for action and make our lives meaningful. According to Christine Korsgaard, your practical identity is "a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking."⁴ If you value yourself under a certain description, you will find performing actions for the sake of certain ends worthwhile and others decidedly unworthwhile. For instance, if you value yourself as someone's friend, you will regard actions like cooking a meal for you to share as worthwhile and actions like having an affair with their spouse unthinkable.⁵ Most of us value ourselves under many descriptions, and our practical identities are therefore multifaceted. For example, you might value yourself as a friend, sibling, citizen, member of a cultural or religious group, *and* a member of a certain profession.

According to Korsgaard, when you act upon the reasons and obligations given to you by your practical identity, your actions express your *will*. Because human beings have the capacity for self-conscious reflection—to step back and assess our reasons for action—we must have principles to adjudicate between conflicting motivations and decide what reasons to act on.⁶ For instance, on any given day, I might like to work on a paper, learn to crochet, doomscroll the news, and listen to the *Lover* album. However, if I don't have time to do all these things, I must have a way of deciding what to prioritize. Suppose that because I value myself as a Swiftie, I choose to listen to *Lover* to the exclusion of writing, crocheting, and doomscrolling. In this case, my commitment to being a Swiftie serves as an organizing principle, and when I act in accordance with that commitment, I exercise my capacity for autonomous choice. Someone who acts without such an organizing principle is, according to Harry Frankfurt, not really a *person*, but a "wanton": someone who does not care about her will but simply acts on the basis of whatever first-order

³ Jessica M. Goldstein, "Down and out and Extremely Online? No Problem: Just Enter a New 'Era,'" *The Washington Post*, August 22, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/08/22/online-eras/>.

⁴ Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 101.

⁵ Christine M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 20.

⁶ Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 1.

desire happens to be strongest.⁷ If I found myself doomscrolling instead of listening to *Lover* simply because doomscrolling is easier, my behavior would fail to express anything meaningful about who I am or what I stand for: it would fail to express my will.

On this picture, your practical identity makes you who you are. If you value yourself as a friend, sibling, citizen, member of a cultural or religious group, and a member of a certain profession, then those commitments make you you. Our ordinary ways of speaking reflect this. When your roles, values, and projects undergo significant change, you might think "I'm a different person now," or if you contemplate violating your practical identity, you might think "I couldn't live with myself if I did that."⁸ If a person lacks a practical identity—if she does not identify with any values or projects—then she lacks a *character*: in an important sense, there is no fact about who she is.⁹

Practical identity is important. But how does one come to have the practical identity one does? And how does one's practical identity change over time? Of course, not all aspects of our practical identities are voluntary. We don't *choose* to be someone's child or sibling; these are identities we find thrust upon us. But with other commitments, there is flexibility. How does one come to value oneself as, say, a singer-songwriter, a cat mom, a Tennessean, or someone's lover?

The first challenge is developing identifications that come to serve as organizing principles despite not being born with any. Tamar Schapiro calls this "the predicament of childhood."¹⁰ On one hand, like all reflective agents, children must find ways of adjudicating between competing motivations. On the other hand, children lack organizing principles to use as a basis for this adjudication. Of course, children have goals and are capable of deep love and care. But there is an important sense in which their agency is not fully developed. As Schapiro puts it, "the condition of childhood is one in which the agent is not yet in a position to speak in her own voice because there is no voice which counts as hers."¹¹ Childhood is about figuring out who you are; this means that in childhood, you don't know who you are yet.

According to Schapiro, one solution to the predicament of childhood is *play*. When children play, they try on selves to be and worlds to be in.¹² When a child plays dress-up, she is not merely dressing up in costume, but also in roles, values, and projects. By make-believing that she is, say, a doctor, donning a tiny lab coat and acting as though her stuffed

⁷ Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (1971): 5–20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2024717>.

⁸ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 101; Angela Sun, "Practical Death," forthcoming in *The Journal of Moral Philosophy*; Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 13.

⁹ Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality."

¹⁰ Tamar Schapiro, "What Is a Child?," *Ethics* 109, no. 4 (1999): 715–38.

¹¹ Schapiro, "What Is a Child?," 729.

¹² Schapiro, "What Is a Child?," 732.

animals are her patients, she learns about what it feels like to be compassionate towards others and to respond to their complaints, mimicking the behaviors of doctors that she has met or that she has seen on TV. But children play in all sorts of contexts, not just the playroom. For instance, at school, a child might try on roles such as *writer*, *math whiz*, *Abigail's friend*, or *leader* on for size, seeing how they feel on her in different classroom contexts before she grows up and settles into the ones that feel best and integrates them into her identity.

Schapiro is concerned with how children resolve practical predicaments through play. However, we face the same kinds of predicaments well into adolescence and even adulthood. Recently, psychologists have begun to understand "emerging adulthood" as a life stage lasting from the late-teens through the mid- to late-twenties during which a person may be freer from parental control than in childhood but continues to lack stability and a strong sense of self-understanding.¹³ The things we do in emerging adulthood might not feel like play—there is not much that seems playful about going to your grown-up job and paying your bills—but they often require putting on an act and sometimes even a costume (as I might dress up in my "big girl blazer" before going to teach a class). Indeed, there is good reason to think that we continue to engage in this kind of play well into adulthood any time we step out of our comfort zones and feel out new roles, values, and projects.

The idea that we learn who we are through play can help us understand the practical significance of eras. I propose that eras are periods of identity-based play. To be in an era is to "try on" a role, value, or project. For instance, in her *Reputation* era, Swift tried *rebel* and *vigilante* on for size, experimenting with these ideas in her music and lyrics. And just as costumes play an important role in games of dress-up, clothes, props, and other aesthetic objects often play an important role in eras.¹⁴ By wearing black bodysuits, hooded capes, and snake motifs, Swift created a visual identity to match her musical one. They served as *prompters*: objects that provoked her and our imaginations as we collectively fashioned her into a person who is rebellious and vengeance-seeking. The eras we non-popstars go through work in exactly the same way. If you are in, say, your fitness era, you are trying on an identity like *exercise enthusiast* on for size, using a uniform of shorts and running shoes to help you get into the right mindset. The fitness era ends when you decide to leave it behind or when you integrate it into your identity and *become* an exercise enthusiast.

Because the kind of play I am interested in involves trying roles, values, and

¹³ Jeffery Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

projects on for size, one might worry that eras are *inauthentic*. After all, there is an important difference between going through a fitness era and being an exercise enthusiast. Someone in their fitness era seems like a gym wannabe, distanced from the activity of exercising in a way that a true exercise enthusiast is not. Indeed, the idea that people who go through eras are phonies is one reason why Swift—whose career is defined by distinct musical eras—is criticized of being fake, of lacking a true artistic identity. She acknowledges this criticism in "mirrorball" when she writes "I'm a mirrorball; I can change everything about me to fit in."¹⁵ There is something objectionable about molding one's identity to whatever situation one happens to be in; such a person seems to lack an identity altogether.

If authenticity is a matter of expressing our "true" or "deep" selves, then eras are inauthentic by definition. However, thinking about eras as periods of play sheds light on the positive role that inauthenticity might play in genuine identity formation. The idea that we sometimes need to undertake pretenses as we flesh out our identities is not new. J. David Velleman has argued that emulating ideals—images of other people or ourselves that are currently untrue for us—can help us realize those ideals in ourselves.¹⁶ For example, Velleman explains how a person who wishes to quit smoking might *pretend* he is a nonsmoker—a person for whom smoking doesn't make sense—and eventually find that he no longer smokes. By thinking of himself as a nonsmoker, the smoker can tell himself a story about his behavior that motivates him not to smoke: "[f]or a smoker, not smoking that cigarette was a matter of changing course and facing the consequences; for a non-smoker, it was a matter of going on as usual."¹⁷

Although my account of going through an era and Velleman's account of motivation by ideal both appreciate the practical significance of pretense, they are different in a few key respects. For Velleman, emulating an ideal is a way of demonstrating one's *reverence* for the ideal. A smoker who pretends to be a nonsmoker in order to quit smoking believes that it would be *better* if he didn't smoke. By contrast, while you can't really go through an era without a positive evaluation of the role, value, or project that characterizes the era, eras are far more *experimental* than reverential. Eras are more about trying on ideals than approximating them, although we may come to revere and identify with those ideals in the process.

The experimental character of eras also distinguishes them from *aspiration*, another process by which we come to acquire the values that make us who we are. According to Agnes Callard, if you aspire to be, say, an exercise enthusiast, you have an idea of what

¹⁵ Taylor Swift, "Mirrorball," *Folklore* (Republic Records, 2020).

¹⁶ J. David Velleman, "Motivation By Ideal," *Philosophical Explorations* 5, no. 2 (2002): 89–103.

¹⁷ Velleman, "Motivation by Ideal," 102.

the value of exercising is, but you do not yet fully appreciate that value.¹⁸ Like going through an era, aspiration can feel like pretending; in both cases, you act in ways that don't express who you really are. However, in the process of aspiring to be an exercise enthusiast, you might find that you have *become* one, that the values of fitness that you once had a mere inkling of are now apparent to you. Like motivation by ideal, aspiration foregrounds a strong positive evaluation of its aim: an aspiring exercise enthusiast *wants* to be an exercise enthusiast. By contrast, while you will evaluate exercise positively in your fitness era, you are just as (if not more) interested in seeing how it *feels* to be an exercise enthusiast as you are in actually becoming one. Therefore, eras permit a degree of experimentation that aspiration and motivation by ideal do not. Consider Swift's *folklore* era. It would not be entirely accurate to describe Swift in this era as an "indie folk aspirant." Swift already had a very clear idea of the value of indie folk music going into her *folklore* era; if she didn't, she would not have been able to write such a remarkable indie folk album! Moreover, her goal was never to *become* an indie folk musician. Rather, her interest was in trying on an indie folk identity to explore the genre and its storytelling potential. While aspiration and motivation by ideal are goal-oriented, eras are above all else exploratory, about seeing how roles, values, and projects fit on us. Appreciating the playfulness of Swift's music helps explain why criticisms targeting her alleged lack of musical identity are inapt. Swift organizes her career into discrete eras because playing with genre, sound, and style to tell her stories is the point.

Although the experimental character of eras mitigates objections about inauthenticity, it raises another set of concerns. Eras are periods of play, and play, as we have seen, has a goal: to resolve the predicament of childhood by helping us develop a practical identity. So, once a person has a practical identity, why should she continue to play? Isn't there something undesirable about living one's life in dress up, of constantly experimenting but never fully or permanently endorsing one's roles, values, or projects—of forgoing genuine commitments in favor of "shticks"?¹⁹ Although we may need to experiment with identity early in life, shouldn't the goal be to eventually get to a point when we no longer need to, a point at which we are wholehearted and unwavering in our commitments and sense of self?

Philosophers have almost always answered these questions in the affirmative. They have not considered ways in which our practical identities may legitimately and productively evolve once they have been established. (This is one reason why Velleman's and Callard's accounts of how we exercise agency over our practical identities are so groundbreaking.) Consider Bernard Williams, who believed so strongly in the necessity of an

¹⁸ Agnes Callard, *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁹ Lauren Bialystok, "Refuting Polonius: Sincerity, Authenticity, and 'Shtick,'" *Philosophical Papers* 40, no. 2 (2011): 207-231, <https://doi.org/10.1080/05568641.2011.591816>.

unwavering character that he used it as a basis for arguing that immortality is undesirable.²⁰ According to Williams, if one's roles, values, and projects evolved in the ways they would need to for eternal life not to be dreadfully monotonous, one would eventually no longer be oneself, and would therefore presently lack a rational basis for caring about one's future self. The static nature of our identities therefore condemns us to boredom that can only be relieved by death. He writes: "Nothing less will do for eternity than something that makes boredom *unthinkable*. What could that be? Something that could be guaranteed to be at every moment utterly absorbing? But if a man has and retains a character, there is no reason to suppose that there is anything that could be that."²¹

Williams' conjecture must be taken seriously. If our practical identities are unstable in the way I have described—if we can freely play with roles, values, and projects without permanently committing to them—then it seems as though there is nothing that makes us who we are; we risk being perilously fragile mirrorballs who will change anything about ourselves just to fit in. However, the account of eras I have provided challenges Williams' assumption about what it means for practical identity to be stable in the first place. After all, eras rarely encompass the *entirety* of our practical identities. Although you might need to rearrange a few things in your calendar to make time to go to the gym during your fitness era, you certainly don't need to abandon your family and quit your job. Your sense of self need not change drastically during an era because eras tend to concern *peripheral* commitments.²² Philosophers who have written about our practices of valuing tend to stress the fact that we are creatures with finite time and cognitive resources and must therefore be selective in our commitments.²³ Some argue further that there are in addition to these practical or psychological constraints on our capacity for valuing *theoretical* constraints on valuing; this is why we think, for instance, that a person with too many best friends has no best friends at all.²⁴ However, while we may not be able to value everything we might like to, we also have a remarkable amount of flexibility in what we value. Our interests, hobbies, and friend circles wax and wane. The fact that these are peripheral commitments does not make them unimportant. So much of our lives take place in these peripheries; we spend a great deal of time engaged in activities that are not, strictly speaking, essential to our sense of self. A life with unchanging

²⁰ Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 82–100.

²¹ Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," 95.

²² I draw a distinction between "core" commitments without which we would cease to be who we are and "peripheral" or "mere" commitments that may be important to us but are not essential to our sense of self in "Practical Death."

²³ E.g., Michael Bratman, *Intentions, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 63.

²⁴ Samuel Scheffler, "Valuing," in *Equality and Tradition: Questions of Value in Moral and Political Theory* (New York: NY, Oxford University Press, 2010), 27.

peripheral commitments—a life with unchanging hobbies, interests, and friends—would be intolerably boring. Moreover, it might be wrongful in some cases to turn what ought to be restricted to a peripheral commitment into a central one. Don't be like Gauguin, who abandoned his wife and five children, leaving them in dire emotional and financial straits so he could make his life into his painting era. We can and should have interests outside of work that are important to us. I suspect that being closeminded about peripheral interests is one reason why Williams is convinced that immortality would be tedious; the "threat of monotony in eternal activities" is only truly a threat if our roles, values, and projects must remain static over time.²⁵ The elastic contours of our practical identity allow us to adapt to changing circumstances and explore diverse values over the course of our lives without compromising our sense of self.

My description of childhood as a predicament may have made childhood seem like an undesirable agential "condition" to be overcome through the development of practical identity.²⁶ However, there is something worthwhile about being at least a little childlike our whole lives, of continuing to "play dress-up" even after we have strong core identifications. In doing so, we create opportunities for ourselves to pursue the wider world of value without jeopardizing our integrity, sense of self, and the demands of our most important commitments. Eras are low stakes "experiments in living," occasions for learning about different values through experience.²⁷

The themes that Swift revisits in her music from era to era allow her to maintain a unified identity and unwavering fan base while experimenting with varied musical styles. Many Swifties feel as though they have grown up with Swift, not just because they have continuously listened to her music, but because her treatment of the same problems becomes more mature with every successive album, just as we approach problems in our own lives in increasingly thoughtful ways and through evolving aesthetic lenses as we age and gain perspective from experience. Consider, for instance, the progression of her exploration of heartbreak in "Teardrops on My Guitar", which captures the raw pain of having an unrequited crush using simple and relatable imagery; to "All Too Well", which recollects intimate details of the highs and lows of a relationship and its aftermath; to "I Can Do It With a Broken Heart", which describes the imperative to "fake it 'til you make it [...] even when you wanna die" with a sense of jaded irony that is hard to reconcile with the song's infectious, danceable beat.²⁸ Swift's interest in revisiting similar themes through different aesthetic lenses in every era was made explicit when she celebrated the

²⁵ Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," 96.

²⁶ Schapiro describes childhood as a "dependent condition" to be "overcome" in "What Is a Child?," 736.

²⁷ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 2nd ed. (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1859), 145.

²⁸ Taylor Swift, "Teardrops On My Guitar," in *Taylor Swift*, by Taylor Swift and Liz Rose (Big Machine Records, 2006); Taylor Swift, "All Too Well," in *Red (Taylor's Version)* (Republic Records, 2021); Taylor Swift, "I Can Do It With a Broken Heart," in *The Tortured Poets Department* (Republic Records, 2024).

release of *The Tortured Poet's Department* by curating five Apple Music playlists containing selections from her discography about various stages of heartbreak. For instance, the playlist entitled "I Love You, It's Ruining My Life" contains songs from every era about denial and ignoring red flags in order to preserve one's idealized vision of a romantic relationship.

One remarkable aspect of Swift's musical playfulness is the conditions under which she was forced to cultivate it. At the outset, her playfulness stemmed not from a desire to explore different values and styles, but from sexist expectations in the music industry that prevent women artists from adopting a fixed musical identity even when they would like to. Swift has been outspoken about the relentless pressure she experiences to reinvent herself in order to remain relevant and exciting. In *Miss Americana*, a documentary that follows her transition from her *Reputation* to her *Lover* era, Swift explains that women in the music industry are expected to update their sounds and looks continuously in a way their male counterparts are not:

Everyone's a shiny new toy for, like, two years. The female artists that I know of have reinvented themselves twenty times more than the male artists. They have to or else you're out of a job. Constantly having to reinvent, constantly finding new facets of yourself that people find to be shiny. Be new to us, be young to us, but only in a new way and only in the way we want. And reinvent yourself, but only in a way that we find to be equally comforting, but also a challenge for you. Live out a narrative that we find to be interesting enough to entertain us, but not so crazy that it makes us uncomfortable.²⁹

The tone of this passage differs starkly from the Eras Tour address with which I opened this essay, even though both concern her constantly-evolving musical identity. On one hand, the passage from *The Eras Tour* suggests that trying on an identity is a form of play, a fun way to experiment and grow. On the other hand, the passage from *Miss Americana* draws attention to how exhausting it is to feel like you *need* to change, and that what looks to others like playfulness is sometimes just a performance—one that women are disproportionately pressured to put on in order to be agreeable.

The expectation for women to mold their identities to others' preferences is pervasive. Here, I think of the "Cool Girl" monologue from the 2014 film adaptation of Gillian Flynn's novel *Gone Girl*, in which Amy Dunne (played by Rosamund Pike) laments her decision to adapt her personality to her husband's desires: "Nick loved a girl I was pretending to be: Cool Girl. Men always use that, don't they? As their defining compliment. 'She's a cool girl.' Cool Girl is hot. Cool Girl is game. Cool Girl is fun. Cool Girl never gets angry at her man. [...] She likes what he likes, so evidently, he's a vinyl hipster who loves fetish manga. If he likes Girls Gone Wild, she's a mall babe who talks football and

²⁹ *Miss Americana* (Netflix, 2020).

endures buffalo wings at Hooters. When I met Nick Dunne, I knew he wanted Cool Girl. And for him, I'll admit I was willing to try."³⁰ Amy's gradual transformation from Cool Girl to Gone Girl shows how easy it is to lose yourself in an act performed for the purpose of the male gaze. Swift herself has reflected on her experience of straddling the line between being playful and losing her sense of self in a performance of identity. Being a mirrorball is a balancing act ("I'm still on that tightrope, I'm still trying everything to get you laughing at me") and mirrorballs, Swift reminds us, are extremely delicate ("when I break it's in a million pieces").³¹

However, all things considered, Swift's playfulness provides us with an example of how unjust expectations can be reclaimed by their targets. Although Swift recognizes the unfairness of the expectation for her to constantly reinvent herself, she does not let that stop her from using it as an opportunity to experiment and grow as an artist and to serve as a model of how playfulness and self-reinvention can lead to self-discovery. As our mirrorball, Swift promises to teach us how to be playful: "I'll get you out on the floor, shimmering beautiful [...] I'll show you every version of yourself tonight."³²

I have argued that eras can be helpfully understood as periods of play during which we experiment with roles, values, and projects after we have outgrown the traditional period of childhood. This play is important not only because it can help us develop our practical identities, providing us with opportunities to figure out who we are and what we stand for, but also because it allows us to stay open-minded toward the wider world of value as our core identifications grow stable as we get older.

While I hope I have offered a persuasive defense of the practical significance of eras, I have not touched on what we can gain by celebrating our past eras as Swift does when she sings "Our Song" on the Eras Tour, despite having written the song twenty years (and ten eras!) previously. While there may be lessons to be learned by going through eras, what lessons are there to be learned by returning to *past* eras, to points in our lives when we had *less* of an idea of who we were than we do now?

Many of us feel embarrassed when we are confronted by our past selves, especially when we no longer identify with them. In fact, it is precisely the lack of practical identification with our past selves that makes us feel embarrassed. While you may be numerically identical to your past self, you are for *practical* intents and purposes a differ-

³⁰ *Gone Girl* (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2014).

³¹ Taylor Swift, "Mirrorball," *Folklore* (Republic Records, 2020).

³² Taylor Swift, "Mirrorball," *Folklore* (Republic Records, 2020).

ent person from who you were in childhood and adolescence.³³ The dissonance between numerical and practical identification with your past self can give rise to embarrassment. People regard your past self as you, but if you do not identify with your past self in the practical sense, you might not want them to. As a point of comparison, think of how you might wish you could pretend not to be related to your family when they do something embarrassing in public; perhaps you walk a few paces ahead of them when they speak too loudly or act too boisterously. You might wish you could say "I don't know them" to passersby, or give them the side-eye to communicate your rejection of their behavior. The more you worry about being perceived as a member of the family, the stronger your desire not to be identified with them. Your desire to distance yourself from who you used to be is not so different. When you feel as though others identify you numerically with your past self despite your practical reorientation, you might understandably want to distance yourself from who you used to be. And the more sincere you were in your past identifications, the stronger that desire will tend to be.

One reason why our desire to distance ourselves from the people we used to be is stronger the more sincere our past identifications were is that leaving our childhood and adolescent years behind is part of growing up. As we shape our identities, we rely on others to recognize that we may no longer be the same people we were before—to *forget* about certain aspects of who we were.³⁴ Recently, theorists have begun thinking about the costs of coming of age in a digital era where we excessively document our lives online, with fragments of our past selves lingering perpetually in the cloud, unable to be deleted and therefore unable to be forgotten.³⁵ On some views, the inability to leave behind the parts of our past selves we no longer identify with prevents us from maturing. According to Kate Eichhorn, "[i]f it matters that other people—our future friends, employers, lovers, and children—never encounter who we were before we matured, it is because maturation is as much an accumulation of knowledge as it is an accumulation of forgetting."³⁶

The account of eras I have provided suggests a possible response to our inability to leave our past selves behind in the digital age: if we can't forget who we used to be, perhaps we need to embrace them instead. Here is a personal example. When I was seventeen, I gave a TEDx talk on the origins of structural oppression. The absurd ambitiousness of the topic for a twenty-minute talk was completely lost on my teenage self, who sincerely believed her ideas would change political theory forever. Now, pre-

³³ Korsgaard draws this distinction between "theoretical" and "practical" identity in *The Sources of Normativity*, 101.

³⁴ Rima Basu, "The Importance of Forgetting," *Episteme* 19 (2022): 472, <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2022.36>.

³⁵ E.g., Kate Eichhorn, *The End of Forgetting: Growing up with Social Media* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

³⁶ Eichhorn, *The End of Forgetting*, 22.

dictably, I count my lucky stars that the video is not on YouTube. I am embarrassed by my teenage self because I no longer identify with her ideas and the unwarranted conviction with which she professed them. I may *look* like the girl who gave that talk in 2012, but I don't want to be identified with her. However, determined to confront my past eras in preparation for this chapter, I googled the talk to see if there were any traces of it on the internet, and I found a blog post written by someone who listened to the talk and used it as inspiration several years later for a discussion on the problematic role of diagnosis in mental health treatment!³⁷ The fact that at least one person got something out of the talk made me think that it wouldn't be so bad if the talk were on YouTube. I could combat my past-directed embarrassment by reframing that time of my life as my *overzealous political teenager* era, just as Swift embraced her *Debut* era self when she sang "Our Song" on the Eras Tour.

Growing up is about figuring out who you are, and if you can't distance yourself from who you were before you had it figured out, you can try to appreciate what you learned before you did. Consider how at fifteen, Swift consoled her heartbroken self with the thought that she would "do greater things than dating the boy on the football team," while at thirty-four she revels in the "so high school" feeling she gets every time she looks at "the guy on the Chiefs."³⁸ Interpreting this as a regression would be a mistake. "So High School" has a childlike spirit, but it is not about a childish crush. Rather, it is a celebration of regaining the capacity for the simple, uninhibited love we can only really experience as kids, before we are weighed down by the baggage of adulthood. I suspect that Swift remembers what this love feels like and was able to capture it so poignantly in "So High School" in large part because she is not ashamed of her past self and the cares and concerns that used to motivate her. Every night on the Eras Tour, she traveled back in time to embrace her younger self; she opened up the *Fearless* set by asking the audience, "Are you ready to go back to high school with me?" Sometimes, growing up is about recognizing the wisdom of our past eras, not leaving them behind.

³⁷ Recovery Network Toronto, *Staircase of Oppression in 'Mental Health* (Recovery Network: Toronto, 2018), <https://recoverynet.ca/2018/10/05/staircase-of-oppression-in-mental-health/>.

³⁸ Taylor Swift, "Fifteen," *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* (Republic Records, 2021); Taylor Swift, "So High School," *The Tortured Poets Department (The Anthology)* (Republic Records, 2024).