

From Aryan Goddess to Pentagon Psyop:
Cultural Appropriation and Alt-right Representational Practices
Irén Annus

Abstract: The alt-right has gained an unprecedented voice and visibility in the US since the 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump. Maximizing their impact through the media and various online platforms, they have engaged in fresh approaches and innovative strategies. This study investigates their representational practices employed in cultural appropriation through which they attempt to channel into global cultural phenomena deep-rooted in American and British (popular) culture in the hopes of broadening their public presence and social impact. Drawing primarily on theorizations with regard to practices of cultural appropriation and strategies of alt-right representation, the study takes a closer look at the alt-right appropriation of Taylor Swift and proposes a model for the logic and strategies employed à la the alt-right.

Keywords: alt-right, cultural appropriation, Taylor Swift, strategies of representation

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0. Introduction

This paper explores the pattern of cultural appropriation as employed in particular alt-right representational practices in the US. It first provides the context for the analysis by elaborating on the alt-right, followed by current theorizations on cultural appropriation. It then discusses the initial appropriation of Taylor Swift and her art by the alt-right before she publicly declared her political preference and the subsequent transformation of her appreciation. Through a closer look at the shifting discourse regarding the Swift-phenomenon, the paper proposes a model capturing the logic and strategies that characterize alt-right representational practices when engaging in cultural appropriation.

1. The alt-right

Alt-right or alternative right is a relatively recent (2008) umbrella term for far-right, white supremacist, identitarian, libertarian, Christian, conservative, patriarchal and misogynistic groups and individuals, including the National Socialist Movement, the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Confederates, to mention a few. While most of the alt-right influencers are men, such as Andrew Anglin, Milo Yiannopoulos, James Allsup, Richard Spencer, the number of female content providers is also considerable, including Lana Lokteff, Lauren Chen, Brittany (Pettibone) Sellner, and Ayla Stewart. They have a marked online presence, the most popular site being *Breitbart News*, although they have primarily operated on alt-tech platforms, such as *GAB* (2016), *4chan* (2003), *8chan* (2013) or *The Right Stuff* (2012) – some of which have by now been closed. Women advocates, however, prefer to place their content on YouTube, Twitter/X or Instagram (Leidig 2023, 4). They all create and share their online content in the hopes of distributing convincing information regarding their political, moral and cultural position through which they aim to form a community, expand their social presence and impact, mobilize followers and recruit new advocates. Their recruiting messages target the youth in particular as many of them are overtly critical of what they perceive as normal or standard in life and are open to alternative views and interpretations. Similarly, alt-right content providers typically also engage in discourses of rebellion featured by anti-establishment sentiments, turning with a sense of nostalgia to the past, thus borrowing from various historical eras in their symbols and ideals, such as ancient Nordic or medieval European periods.

Alt-right advocates tend to be notably vehement in undermining their perceived enemies: following their GamerGate activities in 2014-15 which targeted progressive content in computer games, including gender and racial equality, their online presence expanded to include aggressive methods of trolling, harassment and, with the pandemics, zoom bombing. They employed these methods to target women, members of diverse racial groups and people with alternative sexualities. Their most memorable in-person event, the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, South Virginia, took place in August 2017. While it definitely put the alt-right into the limelight, it failed to drum up the desired popular support for the movement as a whole. However, as they were sturdy advocates of Trump – even if many regarded him rather frail and thus not the iron-fist they wished for a president – they came to the public eye yet again when some of them got actively involved in the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Perhaps we can all recall the emblematic figure of alt-right conspiracy theorist Jacob Chansley, aka the “QAnon Shaman,” his face with sections of the American flag painted on it, wearing a buffalo-

horned helmet and holding a spear temporarily turned into a flagpole for the American flag. Alt-right advocates continued their activities with a heightened zeal amidst Covid-19 and the Trump-trials under the Biden administration, and have successfully supported Donald Trump's re-election to the White House in November 2024.

2. The alt-right and cultural appropriation

One strategy employed by the alt-right to clasp on the surrounding mainstream cultural milieu to establish a common ground through which to connect to a wide range of people is cultural appropriation. Young defines cultural appropriation as a cross-boundary cultural borrowing in the course of which members of one group “take for their own, or for their own use, items produced by a member or members of another group” (2008, 5). He, along with Ashley and Plesch (2002), also calls attention to the fact that it typically reflects uneven power relations. Rogers differentiates between four types of cultural appropriation (2006, 477): cultural exchange, transculturation, dominance and exploitation. While the first two are rather neutral forms of cultural contact, dominance and exploitation reflect power inequality. Dominance refers to “the use of elements of a dominant culture by members of a subordinated culture in a context in which the dominant culture has been imposed onto the subordinated culture, including appropriations that enact resistance,” while cultural exploitation is understood as “the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture without substantive reciprocity, permission, and/or compensation” (Rogers 2006, 477). Moreover, Huck and Bauernschmidt consider appropriation as part of “a continuous process of integrating things and concepts into a ‘culturally constituted world’” (2012, 236-37) which may often be achieved through tailoring the cultural content to fit into the new context. This may produce constructions that may qualify as mis- or disinformation – misinformation meaning information being “spread by actors who mistakenly believe the information to be factually correct when it is not” and its subset, disinformation, signifying information that is being “spread intentionally by various actors who know that the information is false” (Dan et al. 2021, 641).

Cultural appropriation seems to be a practice the alt-right engages with some regularity. In a recent opinion piece at the *Daily Utah Chronicle* at the University of Utah, Langley (2024) comments on the appropriation of historical periods by the extreme right, a process he describes as “the bastardization of history.” He accuses the far-right of mis-appropriating selected past cultures, such as that of the Vikings or the Crusaders, turning them “into easily applicable archetypes” in order to use them as identity markers “to fuel [their] popularity and expand [their] recruitment pool” (2024).

The alt-right also hoped to gain advantages from appropriating some classic artists and their works that currently enjoy wide popularity, such as Jane Austen and her novels. Looser (2019) investigates the numerous ways in which the “invention of Jane Austen has been, and continues to be, a fraught public process – in her case, a bizarre, unprecedented, social, literary and historical extravaganza” (2019, 1). Although she excludes examples of her adaptation by religious groups (see, for example, Annus 2012; 2016), but includes her consummation in other ideological terrains, such as politics and social activism. The volume displays the constant efforts to appropriate Austen through re-making her on the cultural battleground, where she is portrayed both as a guardian of traditional values as well as an ignition for social change. In the late nineteenth century, for example, amateur theatre performances construed her as “an author invested in female independence, self-determination, and powerful public oration,” but then schoolbooks depicted her as “a placid and pious woman who lived a life of quiet retirement” (Looser 2019, 3). And conservative men, both in elite private clubs in London a century ago (Looser 2019, 147-162) and on the alt-right in the US today, seem to capitalize on this very interpretation.

In her study of the appropriation of Jane Austen by the alt-right Wright (2017) identified three ways in which they lend meaning to her character – as reflected in her art: she is seen as a

“1) symbol of sexual purity; 2) standard-bearer of a vanished white traditional culture; and 3) exception that proves the rule of female inferiority” (see also Stewart 2017). These function as cornerstones in the alt-right’s discursive construction of proper, meaning traditional womanhood and gender relations, reflective of the British Regency and early Victorian periods and family model, prescriptive of modern social relations. Frequent Austen quotations, such as “Mr. Darcy was continually giving offence” allow for a cultural return to the heavily patriarchal, male-dominated past the alt-right cherishes, at once downplaying masculine insensitivity or impropriety within certain limits. In addition to quotations, Austen’s age is revived through the aesthetics of cottage core (Luanaigh 2023): some online groups on GAB, such as Cottage Charm, Vintage Homemaking or Homesteading, also publicize events organized in the Regency or early Victorian fashion, such as teas, balls, birthday celebrations, all manifestations of cultural refinement and superiority of the vanished past. Their online content is heavily loaded with carefully constructed images, memes, Rebus puns, witty slogans and videos. A current popular cultural phenomenon in which cottage core and its trad-wife values, aesthetics and lifestyle intersects with the figure of Jane Austen is the art of the American megastar, Taylor Swift.

3. The alt-right appropriation of Taylor Swift

Taylor Swift was undoubtedly the most distinguished popular icon globally for 2023-2024, constantly shining in the limelight because of her Eras tour and generous donations as it progressed, the numerous awards she won and her highly publicized private life. The alt-right, however, has been attracted to her figure for about a decade. It ostensibly began in 2013 when a teen by the name of Emily Pattinson started producing memes for fun by pasting quotations from Hitler on Swift’s pictures (Andrews 2016). The memes soon proliferated on the internet, quickly finding their way to some alt-right sites as well. Various reasons may account for this progression, such as Swift’s appearance, musical style, lyrics and neutrality in public matters. This young, feminine, light-skinned, blonde, blue-eyed, tall and slim woman was the embodiment of the ideal white female figure in the Western male imagination that resonated with white supremacists and the alt-right. Mesmerized by her appearance, various images, blogs, comments and articles placed her on a pedestal as the female icon of the movement, referring to her as possessing “sculpted Aryan form” and having “Nordic blood” (Donnella 2016). In the height of her popularity with the alt-right, she was referred to as “an Aryan goddess,” “Athena reborn” and “a Nazi Avatar” (Andrews 2016). Soon some of her critics also engaged in this discourse, such as Paglia (2015), when suggesting that Swift, a “scary flashback to the fascist blondes...should retire that obnoxious Nazi Barbie routine of wheeling out friends and celebrities as performance props.”

Her songs were interpreted as providing further evidence to her white supremacist stance. She started her career as a country singer, a traditional music genre prevailing traditional, white American experiences, feelings and concerns. Her choice of music style was understood as the expression of a heightened sense of nationalism and conservative world view; consequently, she was automatically associated with Republicanism (Donnella 2016). Furthermore, many detected that the values and sentiments her songs conveyed also characterized her life: she was perceived as rather family-centered, decent, respectful and submissive. Her fascination with cottage core, both in style and content as well as in the visual narrative of her music videos produced during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, also resonated with the nostalgic rural trad-lifestyle and values many alt-righters popularize, such as Ayla Stewart, Estee Williams, Hannah Neeleman, Ivy Van Dusen, or Nara Smith.

Swift has ever so often been accused of being racially insensitive, which only confirmed the alt-right reading of her stance on racial issues. In 2014, for example, hours after the video of *Shake It Off* from her album *1989* appeared, she was accused of being offensive and harmful because of the stereotypical representation of Afro-Americans in the video and of appropriating their culturally marked dance moves, such as twerking – in the name of racial pluralism and inclusion. Her video of another song, *Wildest Dreams*, from the same album also stirred up quite

a controversy: it took the viewer to Africa, which was depicted in a most stereotypical manner through the vast, exotic landscape and animals, where we see a white only crew filming a love story, dressed in the colonial fashion of the 1950s. It was criticized by Rutabingwa and Arinaitwe (2015) for presenting a romanticized and “glamorous version of the white colonial fantasy of Africa,” through which it is recalling colonialism while veiling its exploitative and brutal nature, having caused immense suffering for the indigenous population and their native lands alike. Both in its narrative and visuality, the video was inspired by and thus reminiscent of earlier movies conceived in the same spirit, such as *Out of Africa* (1985) or *The English Patient* (1996).

The reading of Smith’s behavior when in the public eye provided further evidence in support of alt-right interpretations. She was from a middle-class family, growing up in a sheltered home, cultivated a warm relationship with her family as well as friends who seemed to be all white. She was not engaged in public display of impropriety or scandalous behavior (Skeggs 2005) and restrained from expressing her views on public matters, such as social or political issues. Her silence about her presumed traditional and white supremacist position was also explained by the conditions in the music industry. Wright (2017) remembered how a white-supremacist blogger articulated his admiration of her by referring to her as “a secret Nazi” upholding “Aryan virtue in a recording industry debased by multiculturalism.” Milo Yiannopoulos expressed similar views when noting that the alt-right thinks “Swift is covertly ‘red-pilled,’ concealing her secret conservative values from the progressive music industry” (Andrews 2016). He continued: “It’s incredible really that she’s surrounded by these filthy, perverted Jews, and yet she remains capable of exuding 1950s purity, femininity, and innocence...She is the anti-Miley. While Miley is out having gang-bangs with colored gentlemen, she is at home with her cat reading Jane Austen” (Andrews 2016).

It was not until the midterm elections in 2018 that Swift finally broke her silence. In an Instagram post she wrote:

In the past I’ve been reluctant to publicly voice my political opinions, but due to several events in my life and in the world in the past two years, I feel very differently about that now. I always have and always will cast my vote based on which candidate will protect and fight for the human rights I believe we all deserve in this country. I believe in the fight for LGBTQ rights, and that any form of discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender is WRONG. I believe that the systemic racism we still see in this country towards people of color is terrifying, sickening and prevalent. I cannot vote for someone who will not be willing to fight for dignity for ALL Americans, no matter their skin.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/BopoXpYnCes/?hl=en>

In an interview with *Vogue* the following year she noted disapprovingly how “[R]ights are being stripped from basically everyone who isn’t a straight white cisgender male” (Aguirre 2019). In her interview with *Rolling Stone* in the same year she shared that she voted for Obama twice. When confronted with the fact that “a white-supremacist site suggested you were on their team” she responded: “I didn’t even see that, but, like, if that happened, that’s just disgusting. There’s literally nothing worse than white supremacy. It’s repulsive. There should be no place for it” (Hiatt and Heck 2019). Her endorsement of Biden at the 2020 presidential election was a compelling public refusal of the alt-right’s ideology and appropriation of her and her art.

The deterioration of her stance as the alt-right goddess was complete by 2024, primarily because of her political position which she continued to make public during an election year when Donald Trump was given a chance to take office for the second time. By then various conspiracy theories started to surface on the far-right, trying to rub her of her credibility. Jesse Watters on Fox News went as far as suggesting that “Swift might be a Pentagon ‘psyop’ — an asset used for psychological operations” (Bond 2024) in support the re-election of the Democratic nominee Joe Biden. Although Pentagon denied the allegation (Barrón-López 2024), claiming it was absurd, Swift’s subsequent endorsement of Kamala Harris seemed to demonstrate her unchanging political position. Another argument in support of this conspiracy

theory appeared in connection with her partner, Travis Kelce, and his football team. Former Republican presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy called Swift and Kelce “an artificially culturally propped-up couple” (Bold 2024) in support of the Democratic political power. Bold (2024) is quoting tv personality and Republican activist Mike Crispi explaining that NFL “rigged” the final, only “to spread DEMOCRAT PROPAGANDA. Calling it now: KC wins, goes to Super Bowl, Swift comes out at the halftime show and ‘endorses’ Joe Biden with Kelce at midfield. It's all been an op since day one.” In the meanwhile, Donovan reminds us that “the conspiracy theories about the NFL are also very pertinent amongst the right-wing because of all of the history that has gone on with Black Lives Matter and Colin Kaepernick” (Barrón-López 2024). In parallel, deepfake AI-generated “sexually explicit and abusive” images of presumably Swift started to appear first on X, making their way to other online platforms as well, creating a new form of sexual harassment, this time targeting the singer as the enemy (Associated Press 2024). At the same time, former images and pieces glorifying Swift started to disappear from the digital platforms, such as Andrew Anglin’s *The Daily Stormer* – a site which now operates underground.

4. Alt-right representational strategies of cultural appropriation

The case of the appropriation of the figure and art of Taylor Swift exemplifies the logic and politics of the representation of the alt-right which they have developed with the purpose of increasing their public visibility, acceptance, influence and power. As the basic premise, the alt-righters’ immerse in discourses of white injury and victimization which has characterized Southern white supremacist discourse since the Civil War, was pointed out by Wiegman (1999, 117). Adherents of the alt-right also share in having a deeply rooted, prevailing white identity coupled with a powerful sense of loyalty and solidarity (Moss and O’Connor 2020). As they envision to be under attack, they feel the urgency to consider their potential enemies perceived as presenting a threat leading up to their “extinction” which explains “the justification and motivation for violent retaliations” they may engage in (Wiegman 1999, 117), such as the storming of Congress.

This racial injury is coupled with a sense of crisis in American hegemonic masculinity. Having originated in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, during which white American men experienced a loss in their firm socio-economic position in terms of their gender as well as race, resulted in the emergence of what Kimmel defines as the angry white men (2017). They borrowed the discursive logic of the civil rights movement to argue for their injured, deprived and minoritized position (Wiegman 1999) and justify their demands for equal treatment in the name of their aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel 2017). It seems that since they perceive to have lost ground to racial/ethnic minorities and women in the 1960s, their animosity and criticism are often targeted at these groups, which foreshadows potential engagement in discourses of white supremacy, racism, sexism and misogyny. The fact that they feel entitled to formulate new claims as if underprivileged, with their identity being under attack along various fronts, and the fact that consequently they feel entitled to resort to aggression, both symbolic and real, signal that despite their discourse, they continue to maintain some level of power – deriving from being white, male, conservative and Christian – which their discourse of victimization conceals effectively. The appropriation of Swift, a young female icon, also reflects the uneven power relations – in terms of gender in particular – between the appropriator and the subject of appropriation.

In parallel, the new rhetoric of traditional white masculinity the alt-right capitalizes on reflects a “melancholically longing for a romantic attachment to an imaginary past” (Kelly 2020). They resort to appropriate popular cultural figures and products, of both the present and the past, to provide models for their desired lifestyle as well as evidence that it can in fact be achieved. Alt-righters perceive that their aggrieved entitlement also grants them the right to take liberties with laying claims on cultural products, justified by perceived similarities in values,

lifestyle choices, aesthetics, etc. – even if it is based on an uncircumspect borrowing that may lead to mis- or dis-appropriation.

Alt-right advocates often seek to establish points of connection through locating what Scott defines as “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990, 164). These are implied meanings or concealed messages – frequently detectable in cultural products, specifically in popular culture – through which the powerless may voice their dissent and resist domination. Once it is located, alt-right advocates may recognize it as a point of mutual understanding and construct interpretations of the specific product in line with their own agenda and ideology. Swift’s reservation from public display of her political views may be conceptualized as a hidden transcript at the face of the “public script” that characterized the music industry, i.e. being liberal and multicultural. It was one of the hidden transcripts that the alt-right tapped into in the process of appropriating Swift, believing – without actually knowing – that she shares with them their conservative, white supremacist values. The fact that their assessment was wrong resulted in Swift’s misappropriation at best, made possible by the discursive flexibility the alt-right feels entitled to take advantage of.

Moreover, alt-righters also allow themselves to round out or supplement the hidden transcript with further points of perceived similarities, thus conflating their positions with that of the person or product they lay claims on. Swift being perceived not having Afro-American friends in fact does not mean that she is a racist or an advocate of white supremacy. Nevertheless, the alt right chose to interpret it that way and, therefore, could insert another key ideological stance to justify why Swift is a right-winger – when, ultimately, it ended up being another piece of misinformation.

We must remind ourselves that the alt-right is present first and foremost in the digital world which also impacts their representational strategies, from content production to consumption. The online world essentially transformed the way we gain information, communicate and act today. Since for many, particularly among the young, social media is the main source for information, traditional journalism has lost some of the impact it used to enjoy. The issue of control of the online platforms, their content and content providers have come to the limelight, resulting in increased surveillance over certain platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, and the parallel expansion of platforms with minimal or no content moderation, such as the alt-tech platforms. The 2016 US elections was a turning point, argue Nadler, Crain and Donovan (2018), when Trump was not only entertaining his followers through his hourly tweets, but what they call the Digital Influence Machine was also put into motion to “mobilize supporters through identity threats; divide the opponent’s coalition; and leverage influence techniques by behavioral sciences” (2018, 2). Other events, such as Brexit and the 2015 migrant crisis also signaled a turn in communication, allowing for the shaping of the post-truth era amidst the spread of mis- and disinformation at unprecedented speed. This opportune condition is most favorable for allowing for hermeneutic slippage and uncircumspect meaning construction, as the alt-right have potently recognized and fully taken advantage of.

In terms of form, alt-right content producers prefer shorter, simply worded, focused and repetitive messages created in the form of images, brief videos, vlogs and blogs, among others, through which their ideology, “sanitized” for public consumption, could be transmitted (Moss and O’Connor 2020). Memes that are unnuanced and easy to understand emerged as a popular tactic they frequently employ to promote, recruit, persuade and attack in the digital world (Woods and Hahner 2019; Moss and O’Connor 2020), and Swift appeared in some of them. Woods and Hahner (2019) find that alt-right memes were particularly effective in their algorithmic proliferation through various online networks and platforms which not only resulted in the successful dissemination of their exclusionary views but also contributed ultimately to the overall simplification of streamlined messages and the reduction of the level and complexity of public political discourse.

Another fruitful technique includes the ability of the alt-right advocates to bridge the gap between the online and real-life realms by portraying themselves to the content consumers as

authentic and accessible, an average person they can get in touch with at any moment (Leidig 2023). Swift's character resonated with this strategy as she presented herself as kind, credible and accessible, regularly photographed in public doing her daily routine, going out at night or visiting sport events with friends.

5. Conclusion

This paper investigated the representational practices of the American alt-right in the light of their cultural appropriation of the music icon Taylor Swift. For years, she was celebrated as the quintessential female embodiment of the alt-right ideology and imagination. Having outlined the history of the appropriation and later disinhibition of her figure and art, the paper proposed a model regarding the process of alt-right cultural appropriation. Advocates position themselves discursively as historically injured, minoritized and victimized, demanding certain entitlements and presuming certain rights. In order to mainstream their ideology and recruit more adherents, they search for popular cultural figures and products that, in their assessment, reflect their strives and beliefs. They identify similarities and amend them according to the logic of their own interpretation, potentially conferring their own views on the other. They also try to relate to hidden transcripts which may guide them to uncharted directions, potentially leading to misinterpretation and misappropriation, as was the case with Taylor Swift. In the meanwhile, they take full advantage of the opportunities that digital platforms offer and ultimately capitalize on a cultural phenomenon that was already popular. The alt-right was able to capitalize on Swift's character, art and popularity as long as she remained in the background and thus allowed for her misappropriation and symbolic exploitation.

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