UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

“I’VE NEVER HEARD SILENCE QUITE THIS LOUD”: THE COMPLEXITY OF TAYLOR SWIFT’S NEUTRAL STAR TEXT

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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LOS ANGELES, CA

MARCH 24, 2023

ABSTRACT

"I'VE NEVER HEARD SILENCE QUITE THIS LOUD": THE COMPLEXITY OF TAYLOR SWIFT'S NEUTRAL STAR TEXT

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Taylor Swift has secured her place as one of the most dominant stars in pop music by maintaining a diverse fanbase. I argue that she has achieved this diversity by constructing a neutral star image that is widely palatable and refrains from repelling certain demographics. Numerous things help form a star image, and Swift has particularly cultivated a neutral image across her music, Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr accounts, Netflix specials and documentary, interviews, and her apparent refusal to feud with other celebrities. This cultivated neutrality results in Swift's star image being more complex and contradictory than her peers in pop music. Traditionally, people would not think of neutrality and complexity as interrelated. The Oxford English Dictionary defines neutrality as "an intermediate state or condition, not clearly one thing or another; a neutral position, middle ground," and complex as "consisting of or comprehending various parts united or connected together; formed by combination of different elements; composite, compound. Said of things, ideas, etc." Yet, Swift's neutrality ironically makes her star image particularly multifaceted. These techniques contribute to Swift's pop presence as an anomaly: unlike her peers, Swift's neutral persona has allowed fans across the political spectrum to embrace her. I will look at her alt-right fandom and her young, queer fandom to compare and contrast their attraction to her. In this thesis, I will explore the sociopolitical complexity of star texts and the increased ambiguity that Swift's strategies of neutrality have brought to her star image.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank my advisor, Professor McHugh, for continuously supporting me throughout this entire process. From your genuine willingness to learn more about the lore surrounding Taylor Swift to allocating time every week to discuss my progress and provide me with detailed feedback, you have helped me push the limits of my writing and make sense of my initially fragmented ideas. You have allowed me to develop my own voice and maintain composure and self-empowerment amidst peak moments of stress, self-doubt, and exhaustion.

I would also like to thank Professor Deutsch, the instructor for my English 191H seminar, for encouraging me to pursue a Taylor Swift related topic and reach out to Professor McHugh in the first place. Since my topic is unconventional and some may perceive pop music as "low brow," I anticipated resistance and dismissal when I first proposed exploring the queer subtext of Taylor Swift's songwriting, but you taught me to believe in myself and that my ideas are valuable.

Finally, I cannot publish this thesis without thanking Taylor Swift herself. Honestly, my introduction to Shakespearean allusions in "Love Story" (2008) set the groundwork for me falling in love with writing at a young age and ultimately pursuing an English degree. From Fearless (2008) to Midnights (2022), your music has provided me with some of the fondest memories and guided me through the most difficult times of my life, leaving me with a passion that can bolster the enthusiasm necessary for completing such an ambitious paper.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

The year is 2009: Taylor Swift's songs "You Belong With Me" and "Love Story" are taking the world by storm, captivating my child self in the process. Perhaps it was her "girl next door" persona and likeness to a Disney princess that persuaded me to listen to *Fearless* (2008) and sing along as if I had experienced the heartbreak she sang about at the ripe age of eight years old, but her music has remained a fixture in my life since. As her songwriting became increasingly poetic and she shed her country skin, experimenting with various genres throughout her career, I was growing up as well. From listening to "Fifteen" (2008) in anticipation of high school's pitfalls on my first day of ninth grade to relying on "my tears ricochet" (2020) as a soundtrack for reflecting on fading friendships during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Swift's catalog manifests my navigation through childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood.

Her ability to speak to personal experience may have secured my heart, as well as those of millions of other fans, but this is not the sole foundation of her stardom. Her image is incredibly multi-faceted with a vast number of implications. In its greatest extremity, the alt-right has claimed her, picking up on her twelve-year political silence and white, thin, blue-eyed, and blonde appearance. Paradoxically, many queer women have also claimed Swift, picking up on how her songwriting explores loving someone in secret and even romantic attraction to women (from a male perspective). My eight-year-old self-going through her Taylor Swift awakening would have been directionless in approaching this dichotomy. Yet, growing older in the digital age with unlimited access to information did not initially alleviate the difficulties of processing such a contradiction either.

Written by a Swiftie turned scholar, my thesis centers on the sociopolitical complexity of star texts and the relationship between complexity and neutrality in forming Taylor Swift's star

image. I argue that Swift's persona is more complex and conflicting than her peers in pop music. To do so, I will first define what star texts are, the sources that they are composed of, and how gender dynamics influence them. Then, I will compare Swift's star image with three of her peers in pop music – Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, and Ariana Grande – to indicate how her neutral image is an anomaly. Ultimately, I will unpack how Swift's neutral image has attracted members of the alt-right and young queer women, what each distinctive fandom values in her image, and what these groups have in common for her to attract them concurrently.

Star Texts

In this introduction, I will first define what a star text is and the various sources that compose it, as well as how gender influences star texts. As avid consumers of media, we often feel as if we know who celebrities are. We do not genuinely know them as people but rather as a star text: who we assume a celebrity is outside of onscreen or musical personas (Brown 169). Based on the materials we consume about a particular celebrity; we hold an impression of them which is a byproduct of various influences:

> [E]ven when a star supposedly appears as a 'real' person who reveals her personal experiences and innermost thoughts, she is nevertheless a creation, a commodity intentionally produced for commercial purposes. (Brown 168)

We are not always aware of the extent to which celebrities and their management portray themselves in a certain light for the sake of commercial appeal, but this ignorance often increases the plausibility of how stars are presented, and the materials we consume about stars further build and uphold our perceptions of them.

Star Body

On the surface, a celebrity's star body – physical appearance and traits – can influence audiences to perceive them in a certain light. Some examples of these traits include gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, body type, makeup, and clothing. Unlike gender, race, sexuality, and ethnicity, a star's body type (to an extent), makeup, and clothing are within their control, although a star's presentation through makeup and clothing may communicate their sexuality. For instance, conventionally feminine presenting women are more likely to be perceived as heterosexual than masculine presenting women. However, this correlation of normative gender presentations and sexuality is not inherently evident of what someone feels and who they really desire.

Another attribute of a star body is the star voice: the tones and quality of a celebrity's voice, such as being an alto or soprano. Additionally, some singers considerably possess exceptional voices, showcasing wide vocal ranges, while other singers possess ordinary voices with limited ranges. People can make efforts to enhance their voices, but it is generally an innate quality that cannot be drastically altered from its natural state. Exceptional voices could elicit more praise for a star, but ordinary voices may influence the public to perceive a star as being more relatable to the average person.

Primary and Secondary Sources

Furthermore, what I will call primary and secondary sources shape a star text. Primary sources are directly attributed to the celebrity themselves, which contrast with secondary sources: information about a star that derives from outside the star. Primary sources encompass textual materials such as interviews, social media posts, and songwriting. Since we understand

primary sources as the celebrity's direct word, they are assumed to hold a greater degree of authenticity – making them foundational in the creation of one's star text. This is not to say the intentions behind primary sources are entirely pure and devoid of corporate influence, as celebrities are indeed commercial creations, but since these sources directly come from them, they are perceived as some of the most accurate information about them.

Beyond physical attributes are textual, visual, and auditory sources that specifically derive from a star, such as songwriting. Fans frequently assume that autobiographical songwriting is one of the most authentic materials in a celebrity's star text; when famous musicians release self-written songs tackling personal topics such as romance, heartbreak, mental illness, or addiction, listeners often believe the artist is writing from their personal experience. Musicians may also receive a wider consensus of respect for appearing to write about their own experiences, as their music's personal nature can legitimize fans' attachment to it:

> The pull of the autobiographical lies in the assurance that the affective content of songs is real because it is based on experience; thus, fans' attachments to songs are validated because the lyrics were ostensibly crafted not for purposes of mere profit but out of a genuine expression of artistic emotion. (Brown 165)

This view of seemingly autobiographical lyricism as pure artistry can propel fans to perceive such songs as containing substance and therefore hinders their ability to detect commercial motivations behind songwriting. More specifically, a song's assumedly personal nature can deter consumers from understanding that the presentation of being "personal" can be a tactic of assuring fanbase loyalties through emotional persuasion.

Similarly, when a celebrity posts on a social media platform, we often imagine the star dedicates time to curating images and crafting captions before doing so. Regardless of the intentions behind a post, "the fans might not always evaluate a social media message as a moment of expression of the 'persona' (the musician, the singer)…but rather perceive it to be personal and meant for them" (Driessen, "Campaign Problems…" 1064). Interviews are also heavily promotional primary sources that are interpreted with significant degrees of authenticity in relation to a celebrity's star text. Generally, celebrities participate in talk show interviews when they are part of an upcoming release – a new film or TV show season – or have recently put out an album. Not only does the public understand interviews as a celebrity's direct word, but they hear celebrities talk about their personal experiences and/or inspiration for their upcoming release. In the eyes of audiences witnessing how stars conduct themselves in interviews, these clips can provide them with an idea of who the star is outside of their acting or musical personas, or how their personality translates within their work. Notably, celebrities may conduct themselves in a way that aligns with acting or musical personas in order to increase listeners and viewers.

While primary sources are foundational in the formation of a star text, they are limited in comparison to secondary sources. Secondary sources encompass materials such as music criticism, journalism, star news, and positive and negative fan discourse; they prime us with knowledge and expectations that affect how we approach songwriting, social media posts, interviews, and other primary texts. As Jonathan Gray proposes, these secondary sources, otherwise known as paratexts, "condition our entrance to [primary texts], telling us what to expect, and seeing the terms of our 'faith' in subsequent transubstantiation" (*Show sold*

separately… 25). Since there is a greater abundance of secondary sources than primary sources, we generally absorb more secondary sources:

> [W]e often know many texts only at the paratextual level. Everyone consumes many more paratexts than films or programs. When we move onward to the film or program, those paratexts help frame our consumption; but when we do not move onward, all we are left with is the paratexts. (Gray, *Show sold separately…* 26)

In other words, if people solely consume secondary sources and do not engage with their primary materials, then their conceptions of primary texts are exclusively founded on secondary or paratextual materials.

One secondary source that may not initially be perceived as such is celebrity documentary. In comparison to other secondary sources, celebrity documentaries appear in even closer proximity to the star in question, as they contain footage and direct dialogue from the star. However, these documentaries are generally directed and produced by someone other than who the film centers on. There is a high level of marketing and budgeting that is allocated towards the production of celebrity documentaries – yet viewers still generally hold assumptions of authenticity upon watching them. When we watch celebrity documentaries, we are under the impression that we are witnessing a new side of a celebrity that the public had not previously been aware of until the documentary's release. These documentaries often depict stars in settings that viewers are not used to seeing them in: their homes, on the road, and/or backstage. Normally, viewers would not expect cameras to depict the stars in these locations – but the documentary does exactly that. The unconventionality of these settings adds a sense of authenticity to a celebrity's star text while impeding fan understandings of the director's motives to mold star images in a specific way.

Gender

The four artists I consider – three in comparison with Swift – are all women, which makes them more vulnerable to public scrutiny, especially amidst controversies and scandals. In the first chapter of *Anti-Fandom,* Jonathan Gray unpacks how female figures are painted as models of undesirable morals, values, or behaviors to greater extents than men: "[I]n a patriarchal society, female figures … will prove easy default bad objects, as even those consumers with feminist values may find anti-fan coalitions easier to come by when they are directed at female figures or texts" ("How Do I Dislike Thee" 29). There is a double standard between how the public receives men and women in the entertainment industry: in comparison to how it critiques men, it is often more meticulous in criticizing women's behaviors, dating lives, and expressions of sexuality.

For instance, many entertainment news outlets antagonize Swift for her dating history and writing break-up songs that portray her exes in a negative light. One example of this phenomenon is an article for women's entertainment news magazine TheTalko titled "15 Reasons Why It's Dangerous To Date Taylor Swift." It attributes blame for Swift's "failed" relationships to her own shortcomings – "perhaps Taylor has some secret, unlovable qualities that lead these men to run for the hills?" – and later characterizes her as "sly," "insecure," possessing expectations that are "WAY too high," "[getting] too serious too quickly," and "needy" (Singer). In response to a woman writing about her personal experience – something that most songwriters do – this outlet is eager to interpret her vulnerability as an individual failure without possibly knowing the circumstances that could have prompted her to write about her ex-boyfriends in a negative light.

On the contrary, entertainment news covering male artists that have consistently written about romantic relationships may speculate who their songs are about but will rarely, if ever, paint them as overly emotional, serial daters, or blame them for the outcomes of their past relationships. For example, Jessica Tucker's article for celebrity news outlet TheThings – "Fans Think This Is Who Ed Sheeran's 'Don't' Is Really About" – did not demonize Sheeran for allegedly writing about Ellie Goulding in a negative light. Unlike how many celebrity news outlets villainize and slut-shame Swift in speculating about the exes she writes about negatively, the speculation in Tucker's article assumes Sheeran is a victim and sympathizes with his broken heart: "The [song's references to cheating] broke the heart of Sheeran fans and made them want to uncover just who…was the culprit behind the 'disrespectful' move that ultimately ended the relationship" (Tucker). Across entertainment news, male singer-songwriters like Sheeran are not initially presented as the cause of their "failed" relationships, but female singer-songwriters like Swift are, even though the public cannot wholeheartedly know the specifics of any relationships these outlets report on.

Complexity and Neutrality

Considering the multitude of information that shapes a star text, star texts are inherently complex – however, Taylor Swift's star text is particularly complex in its neutrality. Generally, people would not think of neutrality and complexity as interrelated. The Oxford English Dictionary defines neutrality as "an intermediate state or condition, not clearly one thing or another; a neutral position, middle ground." It also defines complex as "consisting of or comprehending various parts united or connected together; formed by combination of different elements; composite, compound. Said of things, ideas, etc." The former definition illuminates an

absence, while the latter definition refers to multiplicity. In Swift's case, neutrality and complexity intermingle in the formation of her star text, as neutrality enables the public to interpret her image in immensely contradicting ways. Swift's neutrality makes her complex because, unlike her peers in pop music, her star image has been claimed by dichotomous social groups. While other stars can only be understood in certain ways, social groups with antithetical interests have resonated with Swift's star text. There are incongruencies across the sources formulating Swift's star text, including the sources that people perceive as being authentic to her. For example, Swift's star body as thin, blue-eyed, blonde, female, and white; this, combined with her twelve-year refusal to discuss politics or controversy, has enabled alt-right online communities to claim her as an Aryan icon. Simultaneously, Swift is beloved by many young adult queer women who appropriate her star text as the epitome of queerness, uncovering queer subtext in her songwriting, and even speculating that she is a closeted member of the LGBTQ+ community. In this thesis, I focus on how gender and neutrality relate to the complexity in Swift's star image.

To clarify, this thesis will not focus on the financial success of Swift, such as streaming numbers, album sales, and tour revenue. I will also not address the controversy surrounding Ticketmaster's sale of Swift's 2023 tour The Eras Tour, but I will address certain controversies throughout different points of her career and how they compare to those of other stars.

In the second chapter, I will compare Swift's star image to her peers in pop music; by comparing and contrasting the star texts, star bodies, and controversies of each star, I will unveil how Swift's star image is neutral and an anomaly. Understanding how Swift's star image is distinctively neutral will pave the way for deducing how Swift can simultaneously be praised by the alt-right as an "Aryan goddess" and a queer icon by her female, young adult, queer fanbase.

Chapter 2 – "Comparing all the girls who are killing it": The Anomaly of Taylor Swift's Neutrality in Pop Music

This chapter provides biographical overviews of Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Ariana Grande, and Taylor Swift and compares and contrasts their star images. Within each star's section, I reveal how different dynamics such as sexuality, gender presentation, race, and political involvement, or lack thereof, contribute to the formation of their star texts. These overviews will exemplify the difference of Taylor Swift's cultivation of neutrality and its consequences in press discourse concerning her. While people can only interpret the other three stars' images in so many ways, the ambiguous effects of Swift's neutral star text hold numerous sociopolitical implications.

Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, Ariana Grande, and Taylor Swift are four singer-songwriters who have dominated and continue to dominate mainstream pop music today. It is worth noting that Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, and Swift have been in the music industry for longer than Grande has, but this does not detract from how Grande has established a place in pop alongside these artists. With respective differences, there is some overlap in how each of these stars have risen to prominence. Beyoncé and Grande kickstarted their solo careers already familiar to the general public, as Beyoncé was previously the lead singer in the girl group Destiny's Child (Britannica, "Beyoncé") and much of Generation Z grew up watching Grande on *Victorious* and *Sam & Cat* (Britannica, "Ariana Grande"). Lady Gaga and Swift's career beginnings are more similar, as both of them learned how to perform music at a young age and debuted at approximately the same time. Lady Gaga learned how to play the piano as a little girl and shortly attended New York University to study music, but she ultimately dropped out in order to pursue a serious career in pop music (Vaughn). As for Swift, she performed the United States national anthem at

an NBA basketball game at eleven years old; shortly after, she learned how to play the guitar (Perone 1).

Additionally, all four stars have names for their distinctive fanbases – Lady Gaga's Little Monsters, Grande's Arianators, Beyoncé's Beyhive, and Swift's Swifties – which dominate fandom discourse across social media. However, the most significant similarity across these four artists is their identity as women, which makes them more vulnerable to public, misogynistic scrutiny, especially amidst controversies and scandals. Their shared gender identity (with the surplus criticism it generates) also arguably contributes to their fandoms' cultlike presence on social media, as the defensiveness and identification with these artists online is a more defining feature of fans of female figures and feminine-coded interests, as opposed to fans of male figures and masculine-coded interests.

In terms of differences, Beyoncé is distinct from the other three artists as a Black woman. However, Grande has presented as Black/racially ambiguous throughout her career, granting her a sexual edge without facing the brunt of systemic racism. Another significant distinction is how Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, and Grande generate controversy vs. how controversy is generated around Swift. All of these stars have been involved in controversies and scandals at some point in their careers, but what separates the three other artists from Swift is that they directly spark controversies that undoubtedly bind them to liberal or progressive politics (queerness to Lady Gaga and feminism and racial justice to Beyoncé), or hypersexuality in the case of Grande. By contrast, most of Swift's controversies revolve around her political silence and the undoing of political actions: the primary contributors to her neutral star image. Even when Swift does vocalize her politics, she often takes a relatively safe stance – years after other artists have already faced scrutiny for doing so. Her neutrality does not necessarily present her as a socially

conservative voice in pop music, but the general public rarely perceives her as a sociopolitical risk taker.

Lady Gaga

Lady Gaga is a 36-year-old singer-songwriter from New York (Vaughn). She released her debut album *The Fame* in 2008 which peaked at #2 on the Billboard 200 ("Lady Gaga Chart History"), but it is her initial shock-value persona combined with her acting performances in *American Horror Story* (2015-2016) and *A Star Is Born* (2018) that continue to uphold her status as a household name ("Lady Gaga").[1] She possesses similar career beginnings to Swift; while Swift released her debut album *Taylor Swift* (2006) two years prior to *The Fame*, she broke through mainstream pop radio with the release of her sophomore album *Fearless* in *2008,* peaking at #1 on the Billboard 200 ("Taylor Swift Chart History"). In addition to each star reaching pop stardom around the same time, both have blurred genre lines over the course of their careers. Lady Gaga originated as a dance pop artist but continuously dabbles in jazz, as she released two collaboration studio albums with Tony Bennett: *Cheek to Cheek* (2014) and *Love For Sale* (2021) ("Lady Gaga"). Country elements also manifest in her fifth studio album *Joanne* (2016), and its album art even depicts her wearing a pink cowboy hat to accentuate the genre's influence ("Lady Gaga"). Meanwhile, Swift originated as a country artist but radically

[1] All of the ("Lady Gaga") in-text citations in this chapter derive from Wikipedia, where anyone on the Internet can contribute to an article about a particular topic. Even though users must provide a citation attributed to the insight they are providing, validity of such information is not definitive and can be altered at any time. The intention behind citing Wikipedia for information about Lady Gaga is to provide general, novel context about her career.

transitioned to pop upon the release of her fifth studio album *1989* (2014) and later explored folk and indie in her 2020 sister albums *folklore* and *evermore*. Despite Lady Gaga and Swift's similar career trajectories, their star images are on different sides of a spectrum. While Swift's image is widely palatable and depends on fleeing political controversy, Lady Gaga has expressed consistent support of the LGBTQ+ community since the beginning of her career, far before the legalization of same-gender marriage in the U.S.

LGBTQ+ identity and activism underscore Lady Gaga's star text, making it difficult for people to interpret her as anything but progressive. Since the beginning of her career, she has been open about her bisexuality – it is even the topic of her breakout hit "Poker Face" (2008). This song details her experience of masking her attraction to women during sexual encounters with men. In the chorus, she sings: "Can't read my, can't read my / No he can't read my poker face," which follows with a male voice singing, "She's got me like nobody" (Lady Gaga, *The Fame*). These lines capture the effectiveness of her disinterest in the man, and the follow-up line from the male voice solidifies the efficacy of her deception. Later in the bridge, Lady Gaga breaks down her initial façade of attraction: "I won't tell you that I love you, kiss or hug you / Cause I'm bluffin' with my muffin" (Lady Gaga, *The Fame*). Refusing to communicate a desire to love, kiss, or hug the man in question, she can no longer lie to him. The line "bluffin' with my muffin" is Lady Gaga's profession of her interest as illusory.

Some may argue her inspiration for this song is not obvious to the average listener, but she has explicated its meaning in several interviews shortly after its release. On the Friday Night with Jonathan Ross show in 2009, Lady Gaga clarified that her desire to be with women while dating a man inspired the conception of "Poker Face": "The song Poker Face…it's about poker facing with your sexuality…When I was making love to my old boyfriend, I used to think about

women sometimes" ("Lady Gaga explains…," 0:55-1:08). Admitting this on live television, Lady Gaga has brought her attraction to women to the knowledge of numerous viewers, including those who may not consider themselves fans of her music.

Beyond publicly identifying with the LGBTQ+ community, queer activism manifests in her music as well. In 2011 – four years before the legalization of same-gender marriage in the United States – Lady Gaga released the self-love and pride anthem "Born This Way" which overtly expresses the notion that everyone is equal regardless of their sexuality or gender identity. The first verse focuses on Lady Gaga's struggles with learning to love herself, recalling advice that her mother gave her at a young age:

> My mama told me when I was young,
>
> "We are all born superstars"
>
> She rolled my hair and put my lipstick on in the glass of her boudoir
>
> "There's nothing wrong with loving who you are"
>
> She said, "Cause He made you perfect, babe" (Lady Gaga, *Born This Way*)

Within these lines, the mother reminds her daughter that everyone is born with potential: being "superstars" upon birth. Furthermore, the mother figure reminds her daughter to take pride in loving herself because, according to her, there is nothing wrong with how God had created her ("'Cause He made you perfect, babe"). Affirming this sentiment in the chorus, Lady Gaga sings: "I'm beautiful in my way 'cause God makes no mistakes / I'm on the right track baby, I was born this way." In the next lines of the chorus, the singer invites listeners to openly love themselves as well: "Don't hide yourself in regret, just love yourself, and you're set." Through alternating between first and second person, she extends this message of self-love and self-expression to the listener.

Excluding reiterations of the chorus, she explicitly expresses support of the LGBTQ+ community throughout the rest of the song. Within the second verse, she subverts the weaponization of religion that perpetuates homophobia: “A different lover is not a sin, believe capital H-I-M” (Lady Gaga, *Born This Way*). Historically, many homophobic people have weaponized their religion as an excuse for holding prejudice and perpetrating discrimination upon LGBTQ+ individuals. Here, Lady Gaga advises homophobic religious people to quit condemning queer people and merely allow God to make conclusions about people’s morality when Judgement Day arrives. In the song’s bridge, Lady Gaga later sings: “No matter gay, straight or bi, lesbian, transgender life / I’m on the right track baby, I was born to survive.” This line destigmatizes identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender; regardless of someone’s sexuality or gender identity, she insinuates they are “on the right track” and “born to survive.”

Since Lady Gaga has consistently supported and identified with the LGBTQ+ community, people are more likely to interpret her advocacy as authentic, especially because it transcends songwriting and is further evident in controversies throughout her career. She may not be the first pop star to have a predominantly queer fanbase and support them, but she has demonstrated bravery in defending same-gender marriage in Moscow, Russia, despite local authorities discouraging her from doing so. In December of 2012, Lady Gaga was set to perform a show for the Born This Way Ball tour in Moscow, Russia. Russian authorities warned Lady Gaga not to speak about LGBTQ+ equality during her performance to avoid arrest or a $50,000 fine – but she did exactly that (Heil). During the concert, she allocated fifteen minutes to expressing her support of LGBTQ+ equality (Heil). As she introduced herself, she stated that she believes in the legalization of same-gender marriage and claimed to not care about the

consequences from Russian authorities: “My name is Lady Gaga. I’m 26 years old. I’m from Manhattan, New York, And I believe that men and women deserve to love each other equally. Cuff me Russia! Arrest me! I don’t give a fuck!” (“Lady Gaga in Moscow…” [00:00-00:18]) Following this speech, “a Russian court [ruled] that Lady Gaga ‘promoted homosexuality’” and “the singer’s Russian concert promoter [had] been ordered to pay a fine in connection with a civil suit by a woman who attended Gaga’s show with her 13-year-old daughter” (Michaels).

Considering the themes in Lady Gaga’s music and her media presence, it is difficult for consumers to interpret her image as anything but a progressive artist who takes risks regardless of the consequences her career may suffer from them. Looking at many of the facets of Lady Gaga’s star body alone, she had the potential to become a neutral celebrity who flees from controversy. Her status as a white woman shelters her from racism, while her thinness allows her to adhere to conventional beauty standards. Yet, other qualities of her star body overpower these palatable characteristics. Lady Gaga has worn revealing clothes since the beginning of her career, repelling numerous conservatives from her fanbase in the process. Towards the end of *The Fame* era, she continued wearing revealing fashions, but it was more eccentric and induced higher degrees of shock value. During Lady Gaga’s performance of “Paparazzi” at the 2009 VMAs, she wore a white leotard with a vast cutout in the middle and fishnets and conducted the illusion of bleeding to death (Dalton). At the 2010 VMAs, she wore a meat dress which angered numerous animal rights activists. PETA founder Ingrid Newkirk interpreted the dress as a desperate attempt to evoke extreme reactions from the public: “[L]ady Gaga has a hard time being ‘over the top’, and wearing a dress made from cuts of dead cows is offensive enough to elicit comment, but someone should whisper in her ear that more people are upset by butchery than impressed by it…” (Topping). Alongside concerns of animal cruelty, Newkirk expressed

repulsion towards her meat dress for its expected pungent smell: “Meat is the decomposing flesh of an abused animal who didn’t want to die, and after being under the TV lights, it would smell like the rotting flesh that it is and likely be crawling with maggots…” (Topping). Through these outfits and performances alone, she does not adhere to traditional conventions of how a woman should look and behave. These elements of her star body – in combination with her overt LGBTQ+ activism and identification – exemplify why her persona is far from neutral. Her star image does not appeal to conservatives, as she is both outspoken on social and political issues and “explicitly [foregrounds] sexuality both visually and lyrically” (Brown 162).

Beyoncé

Out of all the stars mentioned in this chapter, Beyoncé holds the longest reign in the music industry at 41 years old (Britannica, “Beyoncé”) and even the most Grammy wins of all time (Phillips). She started out as the lead singer in the R&B trio *Destiny’s Child* and ultimately branched into a solo career with the release of her debut album *Dangerously in Love* in 2003 (Britannica, “Beyoncé”). Beyoncé’s star text specifically addresses race, but many people did not see her in an overtly racial light until the early 2010’s. Even though her racial identity is common knowledge, few perceived it as the foundation of her star image during the beginning of her career.

Many popular Black artists face pressure to “shed off their cultural identities” (Gammage 724) as a means of securing a neutral, non-threatening image and commercial success that transcends Black audiences. Beyoncé’s status as a light-skinned Black woman does not make her immune to racism, but the prevalence of colorism – “the prejudicial treatment of people based on their skin color,” especially within a singular racial group (Zhang) – makes it easier for her to

abide by white normativity in comparison to dark-skinned Black women. This is further accentuated in how Beyoncé, as her popularity continues to skyrocket, "almost exclusively, only wears White cultural hairstyles, straight blonde hair in particular" (Gammage 726). When paired with her lighter skin, these styles bring Beyoncé in closer alignment with Eurocentric beauty standards, even if it does not cause audiences to perceive her as a non-Black woman.

Additionally, her avoidance of political themes in her songwriting and performances – until the 2010's – has allowed her to appear non-threatening in the eyes of white audiences, especially relative to Black artists like Kanye West who initially acquired status as a pop culture villain in his condemnation of former U.S president George W. Bush. Being cognizant of how West has reduced the enslavement of Black Americans to a "choice" during an appearance on TMZ – "When you hear about slavery for 400 years…That sounds like a choice" ("Kanye West suggests…") – and has rightfully been under fire for proclaiming his love for Hitler and Nazis on Infowars (Romano) all in the past decade – it almost seems impossible to conceive of him ever uplifting the Black community or even saying anything mildly progressive. Yet, in 2005, West spoke out against George W. Bush's administration for its lack of action amidst "the crisis of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast" and during a hurricane relief concert, he remarked, "George Bush doesn't care about Black people!" (Gammage 726). This statement provoked "major attacks on his career as a popular artist," and under public pressure, "he eventually stated that he did not have the right to call George Bush a racist" (Gammage 726).[2] The general white American public's initial abandonment of West as deserving of a space in pop

[2] Even though the American public's initial abandonment of West is rooted in discomfort in the face of addressing racism, this should not detract from the severe harm his statements and actions have inflicted in more recent years.

culture is in distinct contrast to Beyoncé, who was apolitical during this time and even performed at the inauguration of Bush in 2001 during her time in Destiny's Child (archive-Gideon-Yago). In today's political climate, audiences are more likely to interpret artists as endorsing a president's political party by performing at his inauguration ceremony – unlike in the 2000's. The decision for Destiny's Child to perform at Bush's inauguration did not necessarily imply support for his presidency, but it at least revealed a lack of opposition, or at least indifference, to what he stood for as a Republican.

In the past decade, Beyoncé has acquired a reputation for using her music as a political outlet in relation to feminism but not race. At the 2014 VMAs, she performed "Flawless" before a backdrop that reads "Feminist" in bold white letters, which TIME magazine writer Jessica Bennett interpreted as "the most powerful celebrity in the world" reclaiming "a word with a complicated history." The word "feminist" contains a multitude of meanings, including stigma rooted in how some misconstrue the term with demonizing men. As one of the most famous people on the planet, Beyoncé's embrace of feminism deconstructs this use, promoting the application of "feminist" in a positive context. Two years later, months before the election of Donald Trump, she released her sixth studio album *Lemonade* (2016), which "is about the mistreatment of Black women by their unfaithful Black male partners and about the fantasy of rebellion that Black female audiences use to empower themselves" (Ruanglertsilp 202). Even though these themes seem personal on the surface, the intermingling of misogyny and internalized racism in the Black community deeply inform them. Particularly, some Black men with internalized racism and acting upon misogyny may put down Black women in favor of non-Black women. This manifests in the online trend of certain Black men expressing their refusal to date Black women: "[I]f one searches on YouTube for the phrase 'Why I don't date Black

women,' YouTube returns 2.1 million hits. Most of these videos were created not by white men, but by Black men" (Gaines 98).

Beyoncé, as a lighter-skinned Black woman, is less susceptible to this in comparison to darker-skinned Black women. Yet, *Lemonade* explicitly expresses how a light-skinned Black woman can still feel inadequate for Black men despite the leverage she holds over darker-skinned Black women. This phenomenon specifically speaks to "Beyoncé's 'calling out' of Jay Z's infidelity, presumably for a 'lighter' woman with straighter hair," in one of the *Lemonade* interludes, "Denial (Lemonade Poem, Part 2)"; here, "she indicates that she tried to starve herself thin…and that she tried to change her skin color" (Gaines 108). In these lines, Beyoncé communicates how even lighter-skinned Black women face the pressure to undo all traces of their Blackness – further lightening their skin tone and achieving a white-coded, thinner body – for the fear of how their Black male partner will treat them. Moreover, her performance of *Lemonade's* lead single – "Formation" – at the 2016 Super Bowl pays homage to Black culture, and the lyrics celebrate Black features. In the song, she sings: "I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros / I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils" (Beyoncé). The former line expresses adoration of natural Afro hair textures while the latter embraces Black noses in alluding to the Blackness of the music group the Jackson Five.

Additionally, the performance of this song invited a great deal of outrage in how it "reportedly honored the 50th year anniversary of the Black Panther Party" through "Beyoncé and her dancers [creating] a dance formation of the letter X and [sporting] afro-styled hair" (Gammage 716). While many people – especially the Beyhive – praised her performance, numerous members of "the public deemed her performance as anti-police and anti-American," "protests ensued by both police unions and the general American public," and even a

#BoycottBeyoncé social media campaign emerged (Gammage 713). Since this was the first time many perceived Beyoncé in a racial light, such an unfamiliar conception likely worsened the intensity of these reactions to her performance.

Even if she were to remain politically neutral in the present day, she is immune to misinterpretations of her image as antithetical to liberal or progressive politics. As a Black woman, Beyoncé is inherently perceived as progressive, if not a spokeswoman for her race. Contrastingly, white women – such as Lady Gaga, Grande, and Swift – are not automatically assigned the role of representing white people altogether. Richard Dyer unpacks this phenomenon of whiteness's perceived universality in his essay "The Matter of Whiteness": "The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that – they can only speak for their race. But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of a race" (10). On one hand, wearing white-European hairstyles and possessing relatively light skin has made it easier for Beyoncé to appear more racially neutral in the beginnings of her career. Simultaneously, her former image of racial neutrality is arguably motivated in the pressure to avoid representing Blackness negatively in the eyes of white audiences. Yet, she has ultimately shed such neutrality with her increasingly political lyrics and performances. As the political climate has become increasingly polarizing and the urgency for people's favorite artists to become political continues to escalate, she has adapted with the times: publicly declaring herself as a "feminist" and addressing misogyny within the Black community.

Ariana Grande

Ariana Grande is a 29-year-old pop and R&B singer-songwriter from Florida who originally started her career with musical appearances and starring on the Nickelodeon series

Victorious (2010-2013) and *Sam and Cat* (2013-2014) (Britannica, "Ariana Grande"). Grande sporadically released music during her Nickelodeon days, but she did not release her debut studio album *Yours Truly* (2013) until the end of her Nickelodeon career was imminent (Britannica, "Ariana Grande"). In 2014, Grande fully severed her innocent Nickelodeon roots with the release of her more mature sophomore album *My Everything.* On one of the album's singles – "Love Me Harder" – she collaborated with The Weeknd: an artist who regularly explores sexuality through songwriting. While this song may not be one of the most scandalous tracks for a pop star to release, mentions of blurring pain and pleasure in combination with Grande sporting lingerie in the music video is a stark contrast to the former conception of her: the girl who played the bubbly, ditzy redhead on *Victorious* and *Sam and Cat.* Relative to stars like Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, and Beyoncé – whose careers span decades – Grande's career is shorter, but she has maintained a solid presence within mainstream pop music. While being a dominant figure in the pop landscape, Grande has elicited criticisms for presenting herself as racially ambiguous – unlike Swift, who the media has never perceived as anything but white. The disparities in how Grande and Swift present themselves represent two conceptions of beauty standards: Swift's is more Eurocentric and modest, and Grande exploits Black culture to present a hypersexual image.

Grande has faced immense backlash for cultural appropriation and obscuring her whiteness to the point where controversy surrounding her racial ambiguity has become an integral component of her star text. This ambiguity is possibly heightened by her mere existence in R&B: a genre that has historically been dominated by people of color. Even Patti LaBelle "…lovingly called Grande a 'little white Black girl' while presenting an award to the star in [December of 2018]" (Kornhaber). More specifically, Grande is notorious for Blackfishing

"which takes a twist on the concept of catfishing[:] tricking people online into thinking you are someone else" in order to describe the phenomenon of "white women pretending to be Black by using makeup, hairstyles, and fashion that originate in Black Culture to gain financial benefits" (Cherid 359). Critics of Grande's Blackfishing often condemn her excessive spray tanning and the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in her songwriting because she can take on the aspects of Blackness that are more palatable for non-Black audiences without facing the repercussions of systemic, anti-Black racism in the United States.

Her music video for "7 Rings" (2019) is one of many instances in which Grande has Blackfished, wearing a spray tan several shades darker than her natural skin tone:

> Grande uses [a dark tan and clothing and accessories popularized by Black fashion creators] to connotate herself as non-White. The setting [of the music video] emulates the visuals and aesthetics of hip-hop music videos, with a racially diverse cast of similarly dressed women standing and dancing outside and inside a house (Cherid 363).

Modifying her skin tone and wearing popular Black fashions minimize her whiteness, and this image of racial ambiguity is further amplified by how Grande draws attention to her breasts and butt in the song's lyrics: "When you see them racks, they stacked up like my ass, yuh" (*thank u, next*). In the visuals complimenting this line, "the video shows the back view of a Black woman 'twerking' as the camera focuses on her rear end. As Maha Ikram Cherid infers, the juxtaposition of these lyrics and "the visual of a Black female body" capture "the essence of Blackfishing: a White woman taking on Black features, art, music, culture, as a 'look'" (363). By centering the butt in her songwriting while physically presenting herself as Black, Grande "[fetishizes] the Black female form by softly emphasizing [Black women's] most desirable and exotic traits"

(Stevens 7). In doing so, she adds a sexual flair to her image while being able to revert to whiteness at her utmost convenience.

Her embrace of hypersexuality, which is dependent on stereotypical conceptions of Black women's bodies, is generally attractive to modern audiences despite the criticism it generates. Many listeners who are currently in the midst of adolescence or young adulthood are drawn to media that counters their parents' more traditional values and expectations. Pop culture has generally become increasingly sexualized; this is a common concern among families who want the best for their children, but it is something adolescents and young adults have internalized and even embrace. When many adolescents and young adults are expected to behave like grown adults while possessing the limited freedoms children have, feeding into "provocative" forms of media can come off as individually empowering amidst the threshold between adolescence and adulthood.

Several artists beyond Grande, such as Miley Cyrus and Christina Aguilera, have had phases in their career where they heavily derive inspiration from Black culture or try to appear racially ambiguous as "part of an old story about white people profiting off of Black aesthetics to project a sense of edge without feeling any of the associated struggle" (Kornhaber). When such performances of Blackness are no longer considered "trendy," these popstars can easily undo their façade and fall back on their whiteness – Black women do not have that opportunity. In more recent years, Grande has refrained from darkening her skin and become more subject to criticisms of Asian fishing – attempting to appear east Asian – through lightening her skin and wearing popular Korean makeup styles (Spocchia). Continuously undertaking different racial personas according to mainstream trends incline many to criticize Grande for mass cultural appropriation.

Ironically, Grande's racial ambiguity does not make her star text all that ambiguous. The obscuring of her whiteness is far from progressive, as it is contingent on the hyper sexualization and exploitation of Black women's bodies. That being said, the dilution of her whiteness arguably contributes to "shifting standards of beauty which have recently included having a big butt, large breasts, plump lips, and tanned skin, traits popularized by [non-Black celebrities] but traditionally associated with Black women" despite Black women not reaping the benefits of these standards (Stevens 6). These physical features were "once derided by mainstream white culture, [but] are now coveted and dictate current beauty and fashion on social media, with Black women's contributions being erased all the while" (Cherid 362). Considering that Grande has already forgone spray tanning, and other celebrities, like Kim Kardashian, who have previously undergone cosmetic procedures to have large breasts or butts are now undoing them, some argue that the phenomenon of non-Black women performing hypersexualized, socially desirable aspects of Blackness is already losing momentum throughout the 2020's. Nonetheless, the prevalence of this phenomenon throughout the latter half of the 2010's "[plays] upon a fetishistic consciousness…to sell sex in new ways" (Stevens 7). Performing sexualized conceptions of Blackness is a huge part of what has allowed Grande to shed her Nickelodeon skin, constructing an edge that attracts young listeners and a definitive sexual persona which repels parents and conservative audiences in the process.

Taylor Swift

Taylor Swift is a 33-year-old singer-songwriter who was born in West Reading, Pennsylvania, and with the financial support of her parents, later moved to Tennessee to pursue her country music career (Perone 1). She released her debut, self-titled country album *Taylor*

Swift in 2006, but did not fully breakout into the mainstream until she released her sophomore album *Fearless* in 2008. Over the course of her career, Swift has experimented with various genres; her fourth studio album *Red* (2012) employs country, pop, and alternative elements, her fifth studio album *1989* (2014) marks her most radical transition into pop with its synths, and she later explores indie folk in her sister albums *folklore* and *evermore* (2020). Despite each album's distinctive sound, her music is generally "personal (e.g. about previous relationships) and upbeat, not political or activist" (Driessen, "Taylor Swift, political power…").

Unlike Lady Gaga, Grande, and Beyoncé, who have directly sparked controversies in their career, Swift's controversies are passive: instead of being criticized for doing things, she is criticized for not doing things. For twelve years (2006-2018), Swift has dodged overt professions of her political views. In the *Miss Americana* (2020) documentary on Netflix, she recalls authority figures in the music industry insisting that she avoids expressing her political views to avoid the fate of the Dixie Chicks: the female country band who faced immense boycotts and were blacklisted from the industry after criticizing former U.S president George W. Bush's initiation of the Iraq War. In the documentary, Swift recalls these warnings:

> Throughout my whole career, label executives and publishers would say, "Don't be like the Dixie Chicks."…a nice girl doesn't force their opinions on people. A nice girl smiles and waves and says thank you. A nice girl doesn't make people feel uncomfortable with her views. (*Miss Americana* [50:32-50:46])

Deliberate avoidance of political controversy also appears in an old interview with David Letterman, where she refused to announce her political leanings or antagonize a certain party: "It's my right to vote, but it's not my right to tell other people what to do" (*Miss Americana* [50:03-51:00]).

Swift has not been fully successful in her attempts to dodge politics, but she has managed to promote a star text of neutrality in undoing political actions. Toward the beginning of her career, she released "Picture To Burn" as one of the singles for her debut album. The original version of the song generated controversy for using "gay" in a derogatory manner: "So go and tell your friends that I'm obsessive and crazy / That's fine, I'll tell mine that you're gay" (Swift, *Taylor Swift*, 2006). She has yet to address this matter directly, but upon the release of the deluxe edition of *Taylor Swift* in 2007, she changed the lyric to "So go and tell your friends that I'm obsessive and crazy / That's fine, you won't mind if I say" (Swift, *Taylor Swift*, 2007). Changing "Picture to Burn['s]" former homophobic lyrics upon the deluxe release of *Taylor Swift* helps obscure the original version, as her newer listeners would likely prefer to purchase a version of the album with additional tracks. Over time, Swift's record label also would have produced far more copies of the deluxe version of *Taylor Swift*, increasing the rarity of the original release.

As for the implications of the unspoken lyrical change, it can incline fans to believe that Swift understands her previous actions were wrong and she has learned from them. It may not fully absolve them, but it becomes easier for fans to dismiss former homophobia, as she released this song as a sixteen-year-old who freshly entered the country music scene in 2006. Homophobia remains prevalent in that world, but it was especially rampant in the early 2000's; such dominance may be further amplified by the conservative underpinnings of modern country music. Concurrently, changing the lyrics without publicly addressing it inclines others to believe that she does not genuinely care for the LGBTQ+ community but is trying to salvage her career.

Years after the "Picture to Burn" controversy, Swift has suggested her support of the LGBTQ+ community. During the cycle for her third studio album *Speak Now* (2010), Swift released "Mean" as a single; it is a self-uplifting response to a music critic who aggressively

belittled Swift's talent and capabilities during a live performance. Its music video centers on several characters who experience bullying and social isolation, including "a teenage boy, wearing a bowtie and pinkish-purple sweater, holding a fashion magazine, being bullied by football players" (Smialek 102). There is no explicit mention of the character's queerness, but his hyperfeminization speaks to the inversion trope – "sissy boys and their mannish sisters" – in which Western society has historically understood non-heterosexuality through male femininity and female masculinity (Sedgwick 87). Yet, this potential reference to queerness is not compelling enough for the public to conceive of Swift as a committed LGBTQ+ ally, considering that such "activism" remains discreet and does not materially contribute to better conditions for LGBTQ+ folks, or even heightened awareness towards issues revolving around the community.

A few years later, Swift hinted support of the LGBTQ+ community in a slightly more direct manner through her music. In "Welcome to New York," the opening track of *1989*, Swift sings, "You can want who you want / Boys and boys and girls and girls." While the ability for pairs of "boys and boys and girls and girls" to freely "want who [they] want" intimates acceptance of same-gender marriage, she is expressing such sentiment on a non-single track. "Welcome To New York" is a relatively popular song, but people who are not already avid Swifties are less likely to listen to her non-single tracks, let alone perceive her music as beneficial for the LGBTQ+ community. Sporadic hints of LGBTQ+ support allow dedicated fans to strategize such hints as evidence of Swift possessing somewhat progressive politics in the face of potential, homophobic accusations. Equally, limiting activism to hints of support impedes liberal or progressive politics from becoming foundational in Swift's star text – allowing her to maintain the conservative fanbase she initially attracted as a country artist.

Within Swift's political silence lie some subtle feminist aspects as well. In 2015, she donated $250,000 to singer-songwriter Kesha "who had fought a series of lawsuits with producer Dr. Luke, accusing him of sexual harassment. After Kesha lost her legal attempt to break her recording contract that connected her to him, Swift offered the large sum to support her financial needs" (Smialek 102). It is worth noting that Swift did not make a public statement about Kesha, which brought about additional criticisms of her silence, and some even speculated that Demi Lovato condemned Swift's lack of public comment in the following tweet: "Take something to Capitol Hill or actually speak out about something and then I'll be impressed" (Lynch). Even though Lovato did not refer to Swift specifically, many entertainment news outlets interpreted it as targeting her; this consensus manifests how Swift's neutrality stands out in a sea of politically active popstars. People noticed how numerous artists, such as Lady Gaga and Grande, publicly expressed their support of Kesha on social media (Capatides). Such an abundance of outspoken popstars accentuated Swift's contrasting mode of support; rather than composing a written or verbal public statement, she chose to aid Kesha with money. Money and words are not mutually exclusive, but it is relatively safer for Swift to use her money as a wealthy woman than face criticism that could affect her reputation. Nevertheless, materially helping another woman undergoing a sexual harassment trial prompts others to infer Swift as someone who genuinely holds and practices feminist values.

Another feminist-adjacent action of hers was her sexual assault trial. In 2015, former DJ David Mueller sued Swift for defamation, as she accused him of groping her at a meet-and-greet in 2013 (Rivas). He claimed that the accusations have resulted in the loss of his job and asked for $3,000,000; in response, she countersued for only $1 (Rivas). The trial took place in 2017, and the jury found Mueller guilty (Rivas). For some, her $1 countersuit is symbolic – shifting

attention from the monetary logistics of the case to the urgency of believing women who publicly speak up about being sexually assaulted. As one of the most famous artists of the 21st century, there is no need for Swift to acquire millions of dollars from this lawsuit, but she could have asked for more if she wanted to. In only requesting $1, Swift prevents the public from painting her as greedy and forces them to focus on the stakes of the trial. At the same time, the sexual assault trial requires Swift's direct involvement, as the matter particularly concerns her. Minimizing the profit she can extract from it, Swift has strategized this trial to press the importance of believing victims of sexual assault, but she has only advocated for other survivors like Kesha with money rather than words. Swift's monetary support of Kesha does precede Swift's sexual assault trial, but when people witness her only using words to bring attention to her personal circumstance, some can interpret her as an activist at her convenience.

It was not until 2018 – during the Tennessee midterm elections – that Swift took her first explicit political stance to Instagram. In the post, she supported Democrat senate candidate Phil Bredesen, explaining that she could not support then candidate, current Republican senator Marsha Blackburn who "believes businesses have a right to refuse service to gay couples" and "also believes they should not have the right to marry" (Swift, "I'm writing this post about the upcoming…"). She later states in the same post that equality is integral to her political decisions: "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" (Swift, "I'm writing about the upcoming…"). While Swift's position is a rather safe one to take, especially when other stars such as Lady Gaga, Grande, and Beyoncé have long been vocal about

their social and political views by 2018, her confession on social media brought about a multitude of emotions: relief, support, skepticism, and anger.

Upon posting her statement on Instagram, one fan on an online forum applauded her for sharing her political views but believes she was not obligated to do so: "It's not a matter of finally cuz she doesn't owe us shit, but a matter of her trusting us enough to let us know about her stance on politics…" (Driessen, "Taylor Swift, political power…"). On the opposite side of the spectrum, a former fan accused Swift of pandering to Republicans and severing that part of her fanbase when it was no longer profitable to do so: "Somebody said that Taylor finally said this because her US tour is over so she could use all the Republican money she has and throw it back to their faces…We love a calculated queen" (Driessen, "Taylor Swift, political power..."). The wide range of reactions in response to Swift becoming political – even if she is taking a safe position – can be traced to the duration of her political silence and beginnings in country music. Since the media has often understood Swift in an apolitical light and Swift's country beginnings have attracted conservatives to her fandom, perhaps it could be more shocking when she breaks an ongoing silence, in comparison to other stars who have publicized similar views far before Swift has.

Introducing safe, liberal politics into Swift's star text ultimately catalyzed the *Lover* (2019) era in which she released intended pride anthem "You Need To Calm Down" as the album's second single. At this point, eight years have passed since the release of Lady Gaga's "Born This Way," and four years have passed since the legalization of same-gender marriage in the United States. Considering Swift's late public expression of support for the LGBTQ+ community and liberal politics altogether – relative to stars like Lady Gaga, Grande, and Beyoncé – she has elicited criticisms for being an activist motivated by self-interest and even

being a "rainbow capitalist." As gender and sexuality expert Karen Tongson defines, "rainbow capitalism" is the "commodification of things related to LGBT culture, especially the concept of gay pride" (Smialek 105). It describes allyship intended to lure queer people and allies as potential consumers; the example of "You Need to Calm Down" illustrates some of its problems.

This song is not only a response to homophobic attitudes but also to the hate Swift receives online. The first verse of the song addresses someone who allocates a great deal of time towards hating Swift on Twitter:

> You are somebody that I don't know
>
> But you're taking shots at me like it's Patrón
>
> And I'm just like "Damn, it's 7:00 a.m."
>
> Say it in the street, that's a knock-out
>
> But you say it in a tweet, that's a copout. (Swift, *Lover*)

The second verse contains a similar structure to that of the first verse, initially introducing a person the subject "[doesn't] know." It further condemns someone angrily targeting Swift's queer friends and refers to the LGBTQ+ organization GLAAD through a pun:

> You are somebody that we don't know
>
> But you're coming at my friends like a missile
>
> Why are you mad?
>
> When you could be GLAAD? (You could be GLAAD) (Swift, *Lover*)

Despite the song's clear support of LGBTQ+ people, many have criticized Swift for equating cyberbullying to sexuality-based discrimination. Witness *The Onion*'s article, "Taylor Swift Inspires Teen to Come Out as Straight Woman Needing to Be at the Center of Gay Rights Narrative," satirizing Swift equating her struggles as a celebrity to those of the LGBTQ+

community (Smialek 107). While Lady Gaga struggles with self-love in "Born This Way," it has not been susceptible to the criticisms Swift has received. Besides the fact that Lady Gaga has publicly come out as bisexual while Swift has not articulated any identification with the LGBTQ+ community, the struggle of self-love is not a celebrity-exclusive experience. People from various socioeconomic statuses have dealt with insecurities sometime in their life, and discrimination and prejudice can further exacerbate them. Simultaneously, Lady Gaga's affirmation of being beautiful and worthy is something she reflects onto the listener as well. After stating that she is "….beautiful in [her] way because God makes no mistakes," she tells listeners not to "hide [themselves] in regret" but to "love [themselves] and [they're] set" (Lady Gaga, *Born This Way*). When the positive messages are not only for Lady Gaga to revel in but also reciprocated towards listeners, the song becomes exempt from criticisms of distorting pride into a mere self-uplifting action.

In Swift's case, there is a dissonance in the parallel between online backlash and sexuality-based discrimination she creates. In the same way she reduces one of her haters to being obsessive and miserable, she reduces homophobes to being obsessive and miserable. Initially, she describes one of her haters as "stressin' and obsessin'," and later characterizes a homophobe targeting her queer friends as "mad" and possessing "urges to scream at all the people [they hate]" (Swift, *Lover*). It is undeniably difficult for stars to deal with the public monitoring them relentlessly, but the anger associated with this experience does not compare to homophobes targeting queer people. If the hate Swift receives spirals into physical aggression, she can afford bodyguards to protect her – the average queer person cannot do this. Thus, false equivalencies incline many to argue that her attempts towards activism are out of touch.

Despite the criticisms Swift's advocacy provokes, it does transcend Instagram posts, music videos, and songwriting. In addition to donating to LGBTQ+ organizations such as GLAAD, while accepting a VMA for the "You Need to Calm Down" music video, Swift mentions that the number of signatures on a petition for passing the Equality Act – which she promoted at the end of the music video – surpassed the minimum necessary signatures for a response from the White House:

> At the end of [the "You Need To Calm Down" music video] there was a petition, and there still is a petition, for the Equality Act which basically just says we all deserve equal rights under the law. And I want to thank everyone who signed that petition because it now has half a million signatures, which is five times the amount that it would need to warrant a response from the White House" (*Miss Americana* [1:19:10-1:19:42]).

Her speech at the VMAs exemplifies how Swift has effectively used her celebrity platform to mobilize fans to be part of social and political change; even though sharing and signing a petition may be a low-effort action, her impact has garnered the attention of the most powerful politicians in the U.S.

Swift's star text has come a long way in its integration of politics, but she is by no means a paragon of progressive politics. The *Lover* era has inclined some fans to believe she has fully severed her neutral tendencies, but the past three years of her career show that they have never fled. Her most recent studio albums – *folklore* (2020), *evermore* (2020), and *Midnights* (2022) – for the most part, are thematically devoid of politics. This is not to argue that the *Lover* album is starkly more political in its lyrical content than its successor albums or that politically charged lyrics in *folklore*, *evermore*, and *Midnights* are requisites for dismantling her neutrality, but politics signified the *Lover* era to greater extents than the other albums' eras. *Lover* contained a

song in overt support of the LGBTQ+ community, even though critics perceived it as "out of touch." Concurrently, the *Miss Americana* (2020) documentary, which was released towards the end of the *Lover* era, showcases Swift's political journey, and her decision to publicize her support of Democrats on Instagram functions as the film's climax. The film also explores her struggles with an eating disorder throughout her career; in doing so, she points out the impossibility for women to fully satiate conventional beauty standards:

> There's always some standard of beauty that you're not meeting. 'Cause if you're thin enough then you don't have that ass that everybody wants. But if you have enough weight on you to have an ass, then your stomach isn't flat enough. It's all just fucking impossible. (*Miss Americana* [31:19-31:27])

Swift's statement may not be inherently political, but her point regarding beauty standards has been and remains pervasive among feminist discourse; such proximity to feminism has upheld her activist persona from 2019-2020.

Following these rather safe but blatant actions, she has found herself in controversy for environmental negligence only several years after the *Lover* era concluded in early 2020. In July 2022, *The Yard* published a study of the top 10 celebrities who have emitted the most private jet carbon emissions since January 2022, and Swift was the #1 offender: "[Swift's] total flight emissions for the year come in at 8,293.54 tonnes, or 1,184.8 times more than the average person's total annual emissions" (Yard Digital PR Team). She did not publicly address the article, but one of her representatives commented on it, reducing the severity of her contributions to pollution: "Taylor's jet is loaned out regularly to other individuals. To attribute most or all of

these trips to her is blatantly incorrect" (Yard Digital PR Team).[3] Regardless of how many flights come from Swift, she is still disregarding the environment, and her carbon emissions significantly outweigh most people who cannot afford to fly privately at all. Some may also interpret Swift's silence on her private jet usage as a step backwards from her political persona that defined the *Lover* era. Since Swift has never presented herself as eco-friendly, this action may not appear as a pure contradiction, but environmental justice tends to be a common goal among those fighting for social justice, especially when the most marginalized people in society face the brunt of the climate crisis. She has also been condemned for starring in David O. Russell's film *Amsterdam* (2022) because Russell is notorious for allegedly molesting his transgender niece and never denying it (Bradley). Not only is this decision hypocritical for someone who has personally undergone a sexual assault trial only a few years prior, but negligence towards the abuse of a transgender girl contradicts Swift's presentation as an LGBTQ+ ally as well.

The other stars mentioned in this chapter have consistently addressed their political views to the public and/or embrace variants of femininity that impede wide interpretations of their star texts. As for Swift, she possesses the privilege of ambiguity: the ability to uphold a neutral persona. Her thin, blue-eyed, blonde, and white appearance contributes to this privilege, and people of color do not have the agency to be perceived as ambiguous, as to be white is to be perceived as the universal. Like Swift, Lady Gaga and Grande are both white; however, Lady

[3] The Yard provided an update on the study, disclaiming that their data derives from celebrity planes and there is no way to fully certify if each celebrity on the list was present for all of the recorded private jet rides. They further stated that the intention behind the study was to emphasize the environmental harms of private jets, as opposed to targeting specific celebrities.

Gaga and Grande's politics in combination with sexuality foregrounding their music and star bodies impede misunderstandings or conservative appropriations of their star text. Contrastingly, Swift's white beauty and femininity are further apparent through the absence of sexuality in her gender presentation, especially in the earlier years of her career. In her "Fifteen" (2008) music video, "lighting emphasizes Swift's flowing blonde hair and her pale white skin, and her modest sundress marks her as a middle-class 'girl next door'" (Brown 167). She also appears as a "virtuous fairytale princess [who] wears elaborate gowns and pristine white dresses" in her earliest albums, "[calling] upon white femininity" (Prins 144). Modest, nostalgic attire – when paired with her whiteness – allows Swift to be palatable for conservative audiences, but since her whiteness has long been rendered as invisible, it does not inherently repel more liberal and progressive consumers. Moreover, the vast implications arising from Swift's neutrality are what allow her to attract fans from dichotomous social and political groups: the alt-right and the LGBTQ+ community. In the next chapter, I will thoroughly dive into each of these sub fandoms and how they respectively respond to her neutrality.

Chapter 3 – "I've been the archer, I've been the prey": An Exploration of Swift's Alt-Right and Queer Fandoms

This chapter illuminates how the alt-right and queer sectors of Taylor Swift's fandom distinctively interpret her neutrality. I will trace the origins of each sub fandom and explain the specific qualities of her star image that draw these fandoms to her while noting the aspects of her image they respectively deem insignificant. Finally, I will pose the commonality existing between Swift's LGBTQ+ and alt-right fandoms that allows Swift to attract these antithetical groups simultaneously. Specifically, I consider Swift's whiteness and strategies of neutrality. The strategies of neutrality she practices include: twelve years of political silence; undoing of political actions; and only vocalizing political views that are safe positions to take. These qualities and strategies have positioned Swift as a deeply ambiguous star in pop music. As a result, her star image is deeply complex, sparking an affinity with the alt-right and young queer women simultaneously. Swift has failed to condemn Nazism after receiving backlash for taking a photograph with a fan wearing a Swastika on his t-shirt; she also stands out in contemporary pop music for her thin, blue-eyed, blonde, white appearance, which has enabled the alt-right to interpret her silence as approval of their views. Meanwhile, Swift is rumored to have been in a relationship with model Karlie Kloss. She has also released music in her late career that employs queer-adjacent themes (loving some in secret) and explores attraction to women through a male perspective.

Alt-Right

The precise origins of Swift's alt-right fandom are not entirely clear, but the first time the public associated her with alt-right ideology took place in 2009. That year, Swift attended Katy

Perry's 25th birthday party where she was photographed next to a fan with a swastika spray-painted on his shirt. She never made any public comment about the matter, but one of her representatives told TMZ, "she doesn't know who this guy is and she didn't realize what was on his shirt" ("Taylor Swift's Swastika Scandal"). It is probable she did not notice the symbol, but this statement from her team only denies her knowledge of the fan and fails to address the photograph's implications of supporting Nazism directly. While political silence has been foundational in Swift's career, condemning Nazism is not a controversial position to take, nor is it exclusive to a political party – only those on the alt-right would perceive the rejection of Nazism as a bad thing.

Interestingly, Swift is also a Christian, blue-eyed, blonde, thin, white woman who is physically exempt from skin-color-based racism and antisemitism. Considering how white people have long dominated conventional western beauty standards, the white, cultural normativity of her appearance has not always been visible to audiences. In proximity to 20th century white, western icons who have been praised for their white beauty such as Audrey Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor, Marilyn Monroe, and Jane Fonda, Swift merely appears as another miniscule extension of a historical trend. Nevertheless, in the age of lip fillers, excessive spray-tans, and Brazilian Butt Lifts (BBLs), western beauty conventions have become more inclusive of features that were previously perceived as exclusive to women of color.[4] Many white female celebrities, such as Kylie Jenner and Ariana Grande, have capitalized on accentuating these features – presenting an image of racial ambiguity. Swift stands out against these stars for

[4] Even though 2010s beauty standards prize larger breasts and butts to greater extents than previous decades, this is not to say that western beauty standards no longer value thinness at all, as these features are more likely to be considered desirable alongside the possession of a flat stomach.

refusing to participate in beauty trends that would obscure her whiteness, and even her tall stature adheres to a former Aryan ideal within the U.S:

> [I]n the late nineteenth century, the Nordic/Aryans were thought to be characteristically tall and lean. And since the United States was viewed as the melting pot par excellence of the Nordic/Aryan races, thinness came to be viewed as a form of American exceptionalism. (Fogarty and Arnold 3)

In other words, Swift's distinctive, overtly white, and tall appearance speaks to nineteenth century America: a time where the U.S was not racially diverse and primarily consisted of Nordic and Aryan peoples who were noticeably tall in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups. Thus, her inability to confront Nazism in combination with "her phenotypic characteristics as a desirable white woman" (Stern 29) undoubtedly catalyzed the emergence of the alt-right sector of her fandom.

In 2013, certain users on the image sharing social media platform Pinterest picked up on Swift's alt-right attributed whiteness. Numerous types of images are shared on Pinterest, but this association was specifically translated through memes. Known as "Taydolf Swiftler" memes, these pictures distinctively consist of "an image of Taylor Swift" that "is either juxtaposed with a quote by Adolf Hitler, or conversely an image of Adolf Hitler is juxtaposed with a Taylor Swift lyric" (Prins 145). The connection between these two figures was likely fueled by Swift's prior failure to address posing with a fan wearing a Swastika; furthermore, her distinct physical features in the pop culture landscape amplify the sentiment of these quotes. The embrace of Swift among the alt-right "suggests that [the Aryan ideal] is going out of fashion" (Fogarty and Arnold 3), and by appropriating the image of an assumedly apolitical, white star, the alt-right can

strategically use Swift's familiarity to draw prominence back to these beauty standards and ultimately to their ideology.

Swift's alt-right fandom became accessible knowledge for average Internet users with the publication of Mitchell Sunderland's article "Can't Shake It Off: How Taylor Swift Became a Nazi Idol" in 2016. In his article, Sunderland brought attention to how Andrew Anglin, writer for the white supremacist blog The Daily Stormer, has consistently praised Swift as an "Aryan goddess" and unironically affirmed that that "Taylor Swift is secretly a Nazi and is simply waiting for the time when Donald Trump makes it safe for her to come out and announce her Aryan agenda to the world." For Anglin, Swift serves as a canvas to project alt-right desires onto; he wants her to publicly confirm that she is a Nazi because her platform and media presence as a distinctly white star would draw momentum to their views.

Some of Anglin's headlines involving Swift include "Aryan Goddess Taylor Swift Accused of Racism for Behaving Like an Ape in a Music Video," and "Memification: Top Feminist Calls Taylor Swift a Nazi" (Sunderland). In the former headline, Anglin projects his overt racism onto those criticizing the racial implications of Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off Music" video. In the video, Swift dresses in styles representing several music genres and forms of dance: ballet, jazz, cheerleading, and hip hop. Some viewers criticized how, in her emulation of hip hop, she reinforces Black stereotypes by expressing "feigned amazement at Black twerking butts" and failing to showcase racial diversity elsewhere (Prins 144). While dehumanizing Black people, Anglin condemns Swift's proximity to Blackness under the guise of liberals and leftists criticizing the racist implications of her music video. The use of "accused" especially speaks to an inflated fear of censorship amid the rise of cancel culture, detracting attention from the morality of what Swift had done and rather focusing on the outrage she receives. The use of

"calls" creates a similar effect – drawing attention to the feminist in question criticizing Swift as opposed to Swift's actions.

Beyond Swift's phenotype, part of what motivated Anglin to praise her as an "Aryan goddess" is how she represents an alternative to someone like Miley Cyrus: an artist who has maintained a reputation of promiscuity throughout her post-Disney career. In 2013, Cyrus became notorious for hypersexuality during the 2013 VMAs, where "she stripped down to a weird looking latex two-piece, touched [Robin Thicke's] crotch with a foam finger, then twerked on him" (Khal, "A Timeline of Miley Cyrus…") Another point to consider is that while Cyrus has not obscured her white skin tone, she has profited from Black stereotypes and culture in other ways. In the music video for "We Can't Stop" (2013), she wore gold teeth, and New York Times writer Dodai Stewart "likened the treatment of the Black women who Miley twerked with in the video to 'props'" (Khal, "A Timeline of Miley Cyrus…) In wearing styles popularized by Black hip hop artists and revitalizing Black stereotypes to underscore a phase in her career, Cyrus considerably benefits from the presentation of Blackness. Swift may have received criticism for incorporating stereotypes about hip hop, but her association with the genre, or any other aspect of Blackness for that matter, does not compare to that of Cyrus.

Anglin once described Swift as "the anti-Miley," and claimed that "while Miley is out having gang-bangs with colored gentlemen, [Swift] is at home with her cat reading Jane Austen" (Sunderland). While integrating racism, this statement proposes a madonna-whore binary: the notion that women are "either loveable or erotic, but never both together. When this occurs, women can only ever be either saints or sluts" (Nolan). Cyrus represents the "whore" in how Anglin depicts her as "erotic" and "slutty," and Swift represents the "madonna" in how Anglin depicts her as "loveable" and a "saint." Not only does Anglin demonize Cyrus in making

presumptions about her sexuality, but she is also condemned for her closer proximity to Blackness. As for Swift, Anglin's fantasy of her staying at home puts her on a pedestal for her modesty and overt whiteness. For most of her career, Swift has "[presented] an image of sexual innocence, [worn] relatively conservative clothing, and [sung] about romance in nonsexual ways, and "she has even "[declared] the dangers of straying from sexual purity" in some of her early songwriting (Brown 166). In "Better Than Revenge" (2010), a song entailing the experience of a woman "stealing" another woman's boyfriend, Swift sings:

> She's not a saint and she's not what you think
>
> She's an actress, whoa
>
> She's better known for the things that she does
>
> On the mattress, whoa (Swift, *Speak Now*)

To prove this woman is not "a saint," the lyrics allude to her reputation of sexual prowess – " the things that she does / [o]n the mattress" – to insinuate that habitually engaging in sexual activity is a shameful thing for women to do. Swift's former avoidance of sex in relation to romance, demonization of sexual activity, and conservative attire have helped position her as an "all-American girl": "a subject position that is embedded in…chaste heterosexual desire, and proper white girlhood" (Brown 166). Serving as a paragon of "proper white girlhood" certainly provides Anglin and other members of the alt-right with a modern example of a white, patriarchal ideal to uphold.

Other members of the alt-right have interpreted *reputation's* (2017) lead single, "Look What You Made Me Do," as an "alt-right anthem," drawing connections between the lyrics and alt-right ideology. Upon the release of the song, "Breitbart spent the day tweeting out lyrics from the single," and the conspiracy that "Look What You Made Me Do" was an attempt to infiltrate

the mainstream with white supremacist views circulated across Reddit (Khal, "Why Do People Keep Connecting…"). One Reddit post in particular, "Look What You MAGA Do," broke down the song, forming a connection between the lyric, "The role you made me play of the fool / No, I don't like you" and "Democrats [calling the alt-right] deplorables and [mocking their] intelligence" (Khal, "Why Do People Keep Connecting…"). These lines are open-ended, referring to the hurt that comes from falsely being portrayed as a bad person, although many listeners interpret them as a response to how Kanye West and Kim Kardashian portrayed Swift as a liar in 2016 (Grady, "Newly leaked footage…").[5] Nonetheless, such hurt is fairly common regardless of someone's race, political affiliation, and gender, but since there is an "emptiness in how [Swift's] lyrical content signifies," there is room for white supremacists to misinterpret her songwriting (Fogarty and Arnold 3).

Another part of the song that possibly speaks to the alt-right fantasy of Swift introducing white supremacist ideology to the mainstream is in the bridge where she sings:

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[5]In February 2016, West released the song "Famous," which contains the lyric, "I feel like me and Taylor might still have sex. / Why? I made that bitch famous" (Grady, "Newly leaked footage.."). The latter line references "his scandalous altercation with Taylor in 2009, when [he] stormed the stage at the MTV VMAs as Taylor accepted an award to announce that it really should have gone to Beyoncé" (Grady, "Newly leaked footage.."). Swift had already broken into the mainstream with the release of *Fearless* in 2008, but here, West suggests his interruption of her speech accrued attention that made "Taylor [become] a household name" (Grady, "Newly leaked footage.."). West asserted that he requested Swift's approval of the lyric, but Swift's publicist Tree Paine denied this, indicating that "Taylor was never made aware of the actual lyric, 'I made that bitch famous'" (Grady, "Newly leaked footage.."). In July 2016, West's former wife Kim Kardashian posted footage of a phone call between West and Swift where West "asks for her approval"; however, "the video is cut together in a way that makes it unclear that Taylor ever heard the line 'I made that bitch famous'" (Grady, "Newly leaked footage..").

I'm sorry

But the old Taylor can't come to the phone right now

Why? Oh 'cause she's dead (oh) (Swift, *reputation*)

The second line begs the question, "who is the old Taylor?" At this point, many have perceived Swift as a "nice girl" who runs from political controversy by any means. Now that Swift has faced more backlash than she ever has before in her career, facing controversy has become inevitable. Yet, by the release of "Look What You Made Me Do," she has still failed to make explicit public comment about her political views. This continued, lack of clarity could have inclined many on the "alt-right" to affirm that the new, "darker" Taylor would eventually be overt in spreading alt-right ideology in contrast to the former Taylor who suppressed her beliefs to remain agreeable to the public.

While a minority, Swift's alt-right fandom also includes those who do not necessarily believe she is a Nazi but rather rely on her image to spread alt-right values. This is the case for one of many Facebook groups named "Taylor Swift for a Fascist Europe," which has accumulated over 18,000 likes (Sunderland); these groups "seemed to multiply whenever they were taken down" (Prins 145). In an email to Broadly, the anonymous community manager of this group explained that he strives to "preserve Europe through fascism" and "doesn't believe Swift is 'red pilling' the masses," but "believes that she embodies the Aryan spirit" (Sunderland). The alt-right concept of "red pilling" is "overtly linked to white nationalism" and describes the entryway into the alt-right. Particularly, it refers to the notion of "[awakening] to the 'sham [the alt-right calls] post-modern society, [deploring] the menace of immigration, and [ridiculing] notions of diversity and multiculturalism" (Stern 104). Thus, the creator of this Facebook group does not think Swift has "awoken" to "post-modern society" or taken other

measures to become part of the alt-right but finds value in her appearance for appropriative purposes. Her perceived embodiment of the Aryan spirit is not only prominent in her appearance as a thin, blue-eyed, blonde, tall, white woman but also in her former failure to condemn Nazism in 2009 and even Swift's lack of confrontation against her alt-right fanbase.

Ultimately, there is still confusion surrounding the emergence of Swift's alt-right fandom. Even though Swift's failure to condemn Nazism, the creation of "Taydolf Swiftler" memes, and Swift's whiteness have phenomenalized her alt-right fanbase, the duration of its exact presence on the Internet remains unclear. The "Taydolf Swiftler" memes appear to be the most precise origins of the subfandom, but it is not entirely coherent whether these memes were "leftist critiques of Swift's investments in whiteness, alt-right trolling exercises…or genuine right-wing embraces of Swift" (Prins 145). When Buzzfeed asked Emily Pattinson, the alleged creator of these memes, to comment on their virality, she merely stated, "Everyone wants to go viral" (Sunderland). Her response to Buzzfeed is incredibly enigmatic, but its centrality on accruing popularity, as opposed to criticizing Swift, possibly suggests that the memes could be a gimmick rooted in Swift's phenotype and failure to condemn Nazism, or a genuine embrace of her image under an alt-right lens.

LGBTQ+ Fandom

On the other side of the spectrum is Swift's LGBTQ+ fandom, which has been around for nearly a decade, but has become increasingly prominent upon the release of her sister albums *folklore* and *evermore* in 2020. While her reputation for serial dating and writing songs about her ex-boyfriends inclines the public to perceive Swift as a paradigm of heterosexuality, many young, queer women interpret her music through a queer lens. This side of the fandom that

exudes "[interest] in bringing a queer reading to Swift's songbook" are known as "Gaylors" (Grady, "Let's Go down…"). Some "Gaylors" solely perform queer readings of Swift's music and relate it to their experiences without speculating her sexuality, but the term also includes, and most commonly refers to, fans who assert that she is secretly bisexual or a lesbian.

Speculation of Swift's queer identity started gaining traction during Swift's *1989* (2014) era: this album marked her most radical transition from country music into pop music. In comparison to pop music, country music holds conservative connotations; Kathryn Alexander characterizes western country music as a bastion of "ideological and identitarian traditionalism that tends to privilege heterosexuality, gender normativity, devout Christian faith and a strict interpretation of biblical teaching, and political and social conservatism" (197). Pop music is starkly more progressive in its connotations, which could have set the foundation for Swift to become the subject of gay rumors. Concurrently, the *1989* era began shortly after Swift befriended model Karlie Kloss, and the media continuously spotted them together until 2018 (Willen). Many Gaylors would "romantically pair" the two together – a fandom practice known as "shipping" (Gonzalez) – and refer to the couple as "Kaylor."[6] The main incident that spread the perceived viability of this "ship" was when a fan spotted the two at The 1975's New York City concert on December 4, 2014, where the pair allegedly kissed. Twitter user @kaffypark tweeted a grainy picture of the two with the caption, "exclusive taylor and karlie making out #confirmed" (Willen). While Swift's team denied this (Willen), there are celebrities who have publicly expressed belief in the existence of Kaylor. Actress Jennifer Lawrence, during a 2018

[6]The practice of "shipping" is most commonly applied to fictional characters, but its application towards real people continues to escalate in popularity; the ethics of "shipping" real people are often called into question within fandom discourse.

TimesTalk Q&A amidst the release of her film *Red Sparrow*, appeared distraught over the implications of Swift's and Kaylor's relationship when they were no longer seen together: "I'd like to know what's going on with Karlie Kloss and Taylor Swift, that's the honest to God truth" (Murray). Expectedly, theorizing Swift's sexuality should be an exclusive matter of discussion within the Swiftie fandom, but the awareness of Kaylor that public figures like Lawrence possess emphasizes how this facet of Swift's star image has acquired popularity.

Gaylors have continuously unpacked the queer implications of Swift's actions in interviews, live shows, etc. During the Reputation Stadium Tour, she dedicated her live performance of "Dress" to " 'lesbian trailblazer Loie Fuller" because she "fought for artists to own their work'" (Smialek 111). [7] This statement does not touch on Fuller's sexuality, but Fuller's identity as a lesbian prompts some Gaylors to believe that the proximity of Swift's statement to queerness contains underlying motives. After all, Swift is well known by her fandom to interpolate easter eggs within her songwriting, music videos, and social media presence. Throughout the booklets of her first five albums, certain letters are intentionally upper-case to form a secret message when fans piece them together. In the *Taylor Swift* album booklet, the lyrics for "Picture to Burn" "[are] printed entirely in lowercase letters, except for the letters D, A, T, E, N, I, C, E, B, O, Y, S, which are presented over the course of the opening verses and chorus" (Perone 8). In more recent years, the "Look What You Made Me Do" music video features representations of her previous eras and Swift bathing in a tub full of crystals and a $1

[7]The right for artists to own their own work deeply resonates with Swift's star text, as she does not own the publishing rights of her first six studio albums nor have the option to purchase their publishing rights. She plans on re-recording these albums to assure her ownership of their publishing rights and has already released two re-recordings in 2021: *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* and *Red (Taylor's Version.)*

bill, symbolizing her $1 countersuit against the man who had sexually assaulted her ("Taylor Swift – Look What You Made Me Do" 0:37-0:50). Even on "Mastermind," from her most recent studio album *Midnights* (2022), she introduces the chorus with, "What if I told you none of it was accidental," and ends on the note, "And now you're mine / It was all by design" (Swift, *Midnights*). While these lyrics are about a romantic relationship and suggest that Swift has acquired her lover through personal strategy as opposed to fate, they also speak to her pattern of dropping hints throughout her career. Many fans interpret this chorus as a confession that she plans her career moves and does not do things out of mere coincidence. Under the perspective of Gaylors, if she has hinted towards aspects of her life and future releases through career moves, what makes people think she would not do the same with her sexuality? – especially when fans can tie some of these aspects to queer identity. Moreover, the act of unpacking Swift's intentions behind dedicating "Dress" to Fuller reveals that fans are engaging in and "repeating LGBTQ+ history, such as investigating queer icons" (Southerton and McCann 162). Regardless of whether Swift identifies as queer, her image has become an outlet for queer fans to explore history about their own community they may have not known otherwise.

Ultimately, what increases speculations about Swift's sexuality is the queer subtext of her music. Writing about loving someone in secret is a common theme throughout her discography, which resonates with the experience of hiding one's sexuality for the fear of homophobia. This theme of secrecy primarily runs through *Reputation:* the same album whose lead single was appropriated as an alt-right anthem. However, it is not "Look What You Made Me Do" that prompts her queer fanbase to perform queer readings but deeper cuts on the album such as "Dress." Many of the songs Gaylors interpret through a queer lens, including "Dress," tend to be non-single tracks that people may not listen to if they are not already fans of Swift. Swift opens

the song with: “Our secret moments in a crowded room / They got no idea about me and you” (Swift, *reputation*). The opening lines paint the image of two lovers sharing intimacy while successfully hiding their relationship from outsiders, but what has solidified this song’s queer implications is other lyrical aspects that some Gaylors believe point to Kloss. Tumblr user juliethewicked provided a “Kaylor analysis,” of the song, relating the line “Made your mark on me a golden tattoo” to Kloss once wearing three golden tattoos at Drake’s birthday party where she was spotted with Swift. In the same post, user juliethewicked connected the line “I don’t want you like a best friend” to Kloss’s longtime status in Hollywood as Swift’s best friend, and the t-shirt Swift wears in the “You Belong With Me” music video, which contains the names of her close friends’ signed all over it but not Kloss.[8] Relying on outside information about Swift’s relationships, this fan engages in paratextuality to infer that the song expresses Swift’s romantic and sexual desire for Kloss.

Piecing together Swift’s lyrics and career moves in order to prove her non-heterosexuality can appear as a scandalization of her dating life, but doing so has allowed these fans to cultivate a sense of identity and community: “discussions about the sexualities of celebrities reflect more about the speakers than what is ‘real’ – what is important is the identifications and communities that are formed around these queer readings” (Southerton and McCann 163). Gaylors – regardless of whether or not they firmly believe that Swift is queer – tend to identify as queer themselves. In proving that Swift is queer, some of them may feel validated in their identity, as the confirmation of Swift’s non-heterosexuality means their idol is modeling an aspect of these fans’ identities. Furthermore, forming a community around Swift’s

[8] “You Belong With Me” was released in 2008, five years before the media spotted Swift and Kloss together, hence why Kloss would not be featured.

alleged queerness allows Gaylors to interact with other Gaylors and build a sense of unification rooted in Swift's music and suspected queerness, as well as queerness itself.

Some Gaylors, on the contrary, do not depend on dating rumors to understand Swift's songwriting in a queer light but rather connect the lyrical content of "Dress" and other songs to their personal experiences as queer women. Excluding Kloss from the equation, student writer Jenny Jia relates the "best friend" lyric in "Dress" to "two women in a secret relationship who cloak themselves as 'best friends' and 'gal pals' in front of others. Yet beneath, they don't want each other like a best friend." What distinguishes queer relations between men vs. women is the risk of invisibility, primarily for women who are feminine presenting. Besides anger, male emotional expression is stigmatized; thus, any form of affection, even if solely platonic, can be rendered as a threat to masculinity and prompt others to immediately label them as "gay." However, women are often dismissed as "emotional," and when they showcase affection towards each other – even in the most overt ways – it is easy for others to dismiss their mannerisms as friendship antics when both women present themselves in a way that conforms to gender conventions. Jia continues her queer analysis of "Dress," drawing connections between the lyrics and the closeted experience: "Swift speaks to all the queer people who's had to hold back from touching their partner's hand in front of unaccepting family or friends" (Jia). As a means of securing protection from homophobic attitudes while remaining near their same-gender partner, many queer people will act as if the two of them are merely friends. For queer fans who have experienced this, Swift's music serves as a form of reassurance amidst the anxieties that arise from the closet – regardless of whether they believe that was her intention behind the music.

These queer readings became increasingly popular practices amidst the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. On July 23, 2020, Swift announced her surprise album *folklore*, which

was followed by *evermore* on December 11th of that same year. Unlike her previous albums which are generally received as autobiographical, *folklore* and *evermore* showcase a multitude of perspectives outside of her own. In the prologue of the *folklore* album booklet, she writes: "Pretty soon these images in my head grew faces or names and became characters. 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 (Swift, *folklore*). Some of these perspectives include three teenagers caught in a love triangle, as the songs "cardigan," "august," and "betty" are interconnected, distinctively communicating a singular viewpoint within the situation. *evermore* is extremely similar in its sense of character creation; in the album's prologue, she refers to some of the storylines she has carefully crafted within the album:

> "The one about two young con artists who fall in love while hanging out at fancy resorts trying to score rich romantic beneficiaries.[9] The one where longtime college sweethearts had very different plans for the same night, one to end it and one who brought a ring.[10] Dorothea, the girl who left her small town to chase down Hollywood dreams[11] – and what happens when she comes back for the holidays and rediscovers an old flame[12]…" (Swift, *evermore*).

However, Swift does not describe *folklore* or *evermore* as solely fictitious works. In the *folklore* album booklet, she indicates that truth and falsehood are not wholly separate: "The lines between fantasy and reality blur and the boundaries between truth and fiction become almost

[9] Track 11 on *evermore*: "cowboy like me."

[10] Track 2 on *evermore*: "champagne problems."

[11] Track 8 on *evermore*: "dorothea."

[12] Track 4 on *evermore*: "'tis the damn season."

indiscernible. Speculation, over time, becomes fact" (Swift, *folklore*). She also mentions in the *evermore* album prologue that some of the tales across these albums are real, while others are imaginary: "I loved the escapism I found in these imaginary/not imaginary tales." (Swift, *evermore*). When the truth is so deeply intertwined with the imaginary, it is up to the listener to discern reality from fiction. Such ambiguity functions as a site for readers to project their own feelings and experiences onto the lyrics and hypothesize which aspects of these stories are accurate in regard to Swift.

On *folklore's* "betty," she sings about romantic relations with women under a male perspective.[13] "betty," part of the love triangle trilogy on *folklore,* takes on the perspective of a seventeen-year-old boy named James who cheated on a girl named Betty[14] and ultimately begs her for forgiveness. "betty" creates the setting of a high school through referring to a "homeroom" and a "gym," and the speaker continuously refers to his age as an excuse for his wrongdoings: "I'm only seventeen, I don't know anything / But I know I miss you" (Swift,

[13] *evermore's* "dorothea" also entails attraction to women through a man's perspective.

[14] In the bridge of the song, the speaker says, "Those days turned into nights / Slept next to her, but I dreamt of you all summer long" (Swift, *folklore*). These lines serve as James's confession that he had previously been involved with another girl: Augustine, whose perspective is showcased on the track "august." Betty meant a lot to him to the point where he thought about her constantly and felt guilty for his infidelity. Ultimately, James claiming that he "dreamt of [Betty] all summer long" is his way of reducing the severity of his actions, as his romantic encounter with Augustine was not as meaningful as his relationship with Betty. In the chorus, James also asks Betty, "In the garden would you trust me / If I told you it was just a summer thing?" The "summer thing" refers to Augustine; he merely perceives intimacy with her as an outlet of boredom that will expire once the school year starts again.

folklore).[15] Moreover, in the song's bridge, the speaker fantasizes about kissing Betty upon receiving forgiveness:

> 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? (Swift, *folklore*).

Since *folklore* makes no clear distinction between reality and fiction, it is up to debate whether this song is fully rooted in fantasy, truth, or incorporates elements of both. On one hand, Swift is clearly no longer in high school and does not identify as a man – allowing fans to dismiss the premise of "betty" as satiating Swift's desire for storytelling and nothing more. Simultaneously, the ability to explore romantic relations with women in a discreet manner can be a means of engaging in one's sexuality without confirming it to the public, as "this ambiguity of what is 'real' has made space for fans to emphasize queerness and challenge the heteronormative narratives of popular culture" (Southerton and McCann 163).

In Madison Malone Kircher's article for Vulture, "Taylor Swift's 'betty' is Queer Canon. I Don't Make the Rules," she argues the character James serves as a pseudonym for Swift: "The first thing you need to know is that Taylor Alison Swift is named after one James Taylor. So when she's singing as James, telling a story about James, she's telling a story about herself." Under this viewpoint, the name "James" is Swift's way of inserting herself into a romantic relationship with a woman that could either hint towards a past relationship with a woman or a desire to be with women in general. The paratextual steps driving this fan toward this conclusion

[15] This lyric is a parallel to the song "cardigan," which is told from Betty's perspective. While James weaponizes his age to justify his actions, Betty claims, "I knew everything when I was young" (Swift, *folklore*). Unlike James, Betty believes that she did not have the privilege of ignorance in youth.

indicate that Gaylors are not only well-versed in her discography but also biographical information about her as well. This suggests that this fandom has followed her across different eras and have even grown up with her as well. Much of Swift's young adult and adolescent fanbase, who have spent many years with her, uncover personal resonance in her songwriting: "Fans assert that Taylor sings about subjects that are relevant not only to teenage girls, but to everyone – falling in love, feeling like an outsider and coping with heartbreak" (Brown 162). The overarching portrayal of Swift as relatable throughout her career has allowed fans to project their experiences with same-gender attraction onto her music, even if this interpretation may contradict with how other fans and the media view Swift as heterosexual.

Additionally, fans and critics often claim these albums embody the essence of "cottagecore": an online aesthetic that romanticizes running away from the city to live in the countryside and looks like "sourdough bread starters, foraged mushrooms, open meadows, freshly picked flowers, homegrown produce, knitting, baking pies, and yes, rustic cottages" (Bowman). This embodiment is extremely coherent to the point where *folklore* and *evermore* are culturally associated with the cottagecore aesthetic, and Swift has even been credited with popularizing it despite her not using the word "cottagecore" in relation to her music, as Emma Bowman from NPR characterizes *folklore* as "Swift [introducing] a new aesthetic to the mainstream…known as 'cottagecore.'" Defining features of this aesthetic may initially read as repackaged gender conventions for women to willingly partake in, but its participants often do so in a subversive way. In contrast to modern industrialization, the concept of living in a cottage in the woods serves as a more simplistic, sustainable alternative. Cottagecore has especially become popular among LGBTQ+ people on TikTok and is part of several "alt communities" that are "marked by their distinction from 'straight' TikTok, which is not only a marker of

heteronormativity, but also in reference to stereotypes of hegemonic conventions" (Avdeff 82). "#Cottagecorelesbians" is a popular subculture within cottagecore, and one teenage lesbian told Vox she "[finds] solace in Instagram's cottagecore feeds, because 'many [lesbians] aren't accepted in the modern world, so the thought of running away to a cottage is…kind of soothing" (Bowman). *folklore* and *evermore*, albums that are thematically predicated on escapism and nature, align with this desire to evade harsh realities, such as homophobia.

folklore and *evermore's* album art even speak to the premise of cottagecore: *folklore's* cover is a grayscale landscape of Swift standing small against numerous trees in the woods, and *evermore's* cover depicts an image of Swift wearing a fishtail braid and flannel coat, facing away from the camera, and staring back at a forest. The composition of these photos detract attention from Swift, diverting it towards nature: the most visible facet of the "cottagecore" aesthetic. Additionally, the music videos for *folklore's* lead single "cardigan" and *evermore's* lead single "willow" both take place in the wilderness and portray Swift in simple clothing. In the "cardigan" music video, Swift's hair is styled into pigtail buns, and she wears a shapeless, worn-out white dress with minimal jewelry and bare feet. The lack of intricate attire in this music video resonates with the simplistic underpinnings of cottagecore and its lack of consumerism. Furthermore, most of the music video showcases her playing a moss-encased piano against a green waterfall landscape, further placing nature at the forefront ("Taylor Swift – cardigan..." 0:54-2:16). As a continuation of the "cardigan" music video, the "willow" music video opens with Swift entering a green landscape resembling the one in "cardigan" but darker in its hues ("Taylor Swift – willow..." 0:15-0:53). During the bridge of the song, Swift is drenched in an emerald green cloak as she paces through a snowy forest ("Taylor Swift – willow…" 2:05-2:15). Once again, nature foregrounds Swift's music, and the association of these visuals with her

albums – which already contain mass amounts of queer subtext – compels many young queer women to receive *folklore* and *evermore* as soundtracks to their deviation from heteronormativity through "cottagecore."

Comparing and Contrasting the Approaches of each Fandom

The concurrent possession of alt-right and queer fandoms is an undoubtedly rare phenomenon within pop music. In theory, someone should not be able to attract groups whose social and political values vehemently contradict – but Swift has done exactly that. Besides blatant polarization in sociopolitical interests, there are differences in how each fandom approaches her neutrality. For the alt-right sector of the fandom, their attachment more so has to do with what Swift represents as a star than her lyrical content (outside of her greatest hits). Swift has continuously been ostracized for her dating life and writing about past relationships, but what is more significant to the alt-right is her embodiment of white, modest femininity and how she did not initially publicize her political views or condemn Nazism. As for her queer fandom, their attachment to Swift more so has to do with unpacking the queer subtext of deeper cuts in her discography and relying on paratextual materials about her alleged affair with Kloss than the wider public's impression of her. Considering how Swift is feminine presenting, does not appear gender nonconforming, and is often belittled for writing songs about her ex-boyfriends, the average listener would assume she is heterosexual. Yet, much of her queer fandom, who is well-versed in her catalog and paratextual materials surrounding her, utilize these sources and/or personal experience to find resonance in her songwriting or even theorize her sexual orientation.

What has allowed Swift to appeal to both these groups is her construction of universality: "Taylor Swift's popularity is premised upon her image as someone who… is still an 'all-American girl next door'…Fans assert that Taylor sings about subjects that are relevant not only to teenage girls, but to everyone" (Brown 162). However, such relatability is predicated upon the privileged facets of identity she holds: "Swift's positioning as an 'authentic' American girl subject is wholly tied to her status as a white, middle class, heterosexual, normatively feminine girl" (Brown 162). These positions are dominant ones to hold in society; thus, they are assumed to be the default ones. As someone who is privileged within these realms, she has never been obligated to represent the interests of a marginalized group. Moreover, these facets of her identity are further accentuated through her twelve-year political silence, history of undoing political actions, and publicly taking safe sociopolitical stances. In the case of the alt-right, her silence translates as acceptance of hegemony and/or fear of openly expressing conservative or alt-right views, while much of the LGBTQ+ fandom perceives her silence as a fear of coming out of the closet.

Furthermore, Swift's whiteness is even prominent among her queer fandom but in more subtle ways compared to her alt-right fandom. While the cottagecore aesthetic is mainly popular among queer women, it has been criticized for its centrality on whiteness. Some can interpret the idea of "running away to live in the woods" as fleeing the pitfalls of capitalism and possibly homophobia, but its premise also holds settler colonialist implications. Unpacking the colonialist ties to the cottagecore aesthetic, Environmental Justice Fellow Angely Mercado writes:

> The dual 'classic' American traditions of farming and frolicking in nature reflect that history of settler colonialism. They exist based on the displacement of Indigenous people, and labor from indentured servants and enslaved people. And despite the fact that

> cottagecore is such a dreamy form of escapism, it still reflects that very whitewashed reality.

To romanticize fleeing industrialization and claiming land without acknowledging its previous caretakers is to evade the implications for indigenous people and other displaced, marginalized groups. This premise explains why this queer aesthetic is predominantly white, as racism does not intermingle with white women's experiences with homophobia. Swift likely did not intend for her nature aesthetic to come with repercussions for marginalized people, but her cultural alignment with cottagecore has compelled numerous, mostly white queer women to uphold her image as a voice of cottagecore: an aesthetic that has been used subversively but can also be employed as a return to conservative values.

This would not be the first time Swift participated in evoking imagery that is reminiscent of colonialism. In 2015, her music video for "Wildest Dreams" was under fire for its "colonial nostalgia" to more overt degrees than that of her *folkore* and *evermore* era (Prins 144). The music video features Swift emulating Elizabeth Taylor alongside Scott Eastwood emulating his father Clint Eastwood in Africa where only white people and animals are present. Such erasure of black People in Africa speaks to "a glamorous version of the white colonial fantasy of Africa" where white people have overtaken African lands and eradicated Black people from it (Rutabingwa and Kassaga). Unlike *folklore* and *evermore's* resemblance to the cottagecore aesthetic and subtleties, Swift's "Wildest Dreams" music video cannot reasonably be interpreted within a context that does not uphold dominant hegemony. Not only is the music video colonialist for its white depiction of Africa and heteronormative for its focus on a heterosexual relationship (the pairing of Swift with Eastwood), but it pays homage to old Hollywood. Paying tribute to the first half of the 20th century, in combination with these other aspects, speaks to a

reactionary desire to return to a time before the most dramatic improvements in liberties for women, people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, etc.

Chapter 4 – Conclusion

This thesis aimed to highlight the sociopolitical complexity of star texts and how the relationship between complexity and neutrality construct Taylor Swift's star image. I have laid out what star texts are, the sources they are comprised of, and how gender dynamics influence their construction. Particularly, the significance of gender has led me to exclusively compare Swift's star text to those of other female pop stars dominating the music industry today: Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, and Ariana Grande. Swift is especially distinct from the other three for her twelve-year political silence and overtly white, modest appearance. As a result, she has been able to uphold a far more complex persona whose neutrality has been interpreted in dichotomous ways. The alt-right has interpreted her whiteness, political silence, and failure to condemn Nazism as bolstering an Aryan beauty ideal. Meanwhile, her LGBTQ+ fandom has interpreted Swift's exploration of loving someone in secret and attraction to women through a male point of view as a reservoir of queerness.

My intention behind writing this thesis was to initiate a feminist project and unpack how gender, race, and presentations of sexuality influence the ways people perceive stars. For many fans, including myself, Swift has always appeared as an authentic "girl next door" whose lyrics are relatable to anyone regardless of their circumstances. I have long held this belief, and to this day, her music continues to spark a personal affinity with my experiences; my research has illuminated how such relatability has largely been built upon her racial identity and neutrality.

I would like to clarify that my exploration of her queer fandom was not to prove whether she is queer or heterosexual, nor form an argument about the ethics of creating queer subtext while not being openly LGBTQ+. Rather I wanted to understand the elements of her star text that allow queer women to relate to her. My motive behind unpacking her alt-right fandom is

similar, but to an even greater extent. As I have previously mentioned, there is still a lack of clarity surrounding the beginnings of her alt-right fandom, as the phenomenon appears to have abruptly exploded on the Internet on a random day in 2016. I have highlighted earlier traces of the public perceiving Swift in relation to the alt-right, such as the emergence of "Taydolf Swiftler" memes in 2013, but I have struggled to find posts, articles, and other texts directly from alt-right online communities that have praised Swift between 2013 and 2016. When I tried to access hyperlinks from articles citing alt-right viewpoints, many of them were unavailable – most likely, they were either eradicated from the Internet entirely or restricted by Google. Since alt-right, textual materials pertaining to Swift have been inaccessible outside of scholars and journalists reporting on them, I remain curious about how these communities operated during these years and how they may have responded to other aspects of her star text.

Otherwise, on a broader level, I hope my thesis speaks to the importance of being critical of media despite our enjoyment of it. Throughout this paper, I have criticized the implications of Swift's scandals, controversies, and political silence, as I do not want my emotional connection with her music to infringe upon my commitment to performing feminist analysis. Simultaneously, the way her music has guided me through the highs and lows of childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood is what compels me to defend Swift and other female public figures from misogynistic double standards in the media, and even invigorated me to willingly complete a senior thesis in the first place.

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