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### Cool Kids, Camp, and Keeping Calm: Taylor Swift's Attempt to Address Homophobia

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Zoe Levin  
Class of 2023

## Cool Kids, Camp, and Keeping Calm:

### Taylor Swift's Attempt to Address Homophobia

Taylor Swift has been a pop culture icon for well over a decade. She is known and loved for her narrative songs about relationships, so her new album *Lover* was monumental for being her first to address social politics. Most notably, the song “You Need to Calm Down” actively addresses Swift’s progressive position toward LGBTQ rights. A scathing critique of homophobic individuals, “You Need to Calm Down” was released on President Trump’s birthday as the second single from *Lover*, with its music video following shortly thereafter. Featuring a whirl of colors and playful celebrity cameos, the video promotes a lifestyle of LGBTQ acceptance and celebration. However, in many ways, “You Need to Calm Down” is problematic in its representation of queer pride. This paper shows how the video’s Camp aesthetic and mainstream sensibilities fashion the queer individual as unrelatable, infantilized, and separated from the larger social world – ultimately failing to validate the transgressive and instead promoting normalization. This paper argues that the video for “You Need to Calm Down,” in making notable use of pop culture conventions and mainstream ideologies, limits queer acceptance to the boundaries of the heteronormative and, thus, can be seen itself as an example of subtle homophobia. This paper therefore demonstrates that homophobia exists beyond its standard portrayals in mainstream media (and this video) and can encompass well-meaning, but misguided efforts to portray homosexuality in relation to the normative.

The video opens on Swift relaxing in a trailer, surrounded by trivial, candy-colored objects. Upon receiving a homophobic tweet, her phone catches fire and sets the trailer in flames,

so Swift leaves to relax in a kiddie pool as the chorus kicks in. The camera then pans to the trailer-park village Swift appears to be living in, full of LGBTQ celebrities living in harmony. All wear some form of festive gear and engage in leisurely activities like eating snow cones, sunbathing, and having a tea party. As Swift admonishes those “coming at my friends like a missile,” we see a group of angry individuals who carry signs protesting homosexuality (Swift). Their efforts seem to have no effect on the residents, who go on to partake first in a drag contest with no winner, and then in a cake-exclusive food fight. In the midst of the flying confectionary, Swift wears a french-fries costume and platonically unites with Katy Perry, dressed as a burger. The video closes with a ten-second appeal for viewers to sign her petition for Senate support of the Equality Act (Swift).

Both lyrically and visually, “You Need to Calm Down” emphasizes a contrast between the protestors and trailer-park residents. Our first good look at the protestors reveals angry, middle-aged Americans wearing outfits clearly derivative of the stereotypical Southern conservative. They appear unkempt and monochromatic, in stark contrast to the highly stylized and colorful life of the trailer-park. With misspelled signs and unheard shouts, their efforts come off as uneducated and irrational, a notion emphasized by the scornful tone of Swift’s lyrics. While protestors yell ignored at the feet of sunbathing residents, Swift sings “sunshine in the street at the parade, but you would rather be in the dark age,” and asks them “why are you mad, when you could be GLAAD?” (an American media force promoting LGBT rights and acceptance) (Swift). Here, the protestors’ stance is painted as outdated and irrationally angry, and Swift’s counterexamples of modernity and equality deliberately emphasize happiness and celebration. In this lies the ultimate contrast established between the queer community and its protestors, hinted to when Swift admonishes that “stressin’ and obsessin’ ‘bout somebody else is

no fun” (Swift). The residents have what the protestors lack: fun. While a homophobic stance is made to seem wholly unappealing, the LGBTQ community is colorful, lively, and carefree. In the face of haters, this queer world’s main defense is a commitment to having a good time, evidenced during the video’s closing, when protestors shout outside the trailer-park’s vibrant, sugary food-fight.

Presumably, this contrast is established in order to create a clear good-versus-bad narrative. Within the highly polarized setting of the trailer park, Swift encourages sympathizing with the LGBTQ “side”—but does she succeed? While the residents’ lifestyle is more appealing than the protestors, it also comes off as over-excessive, exaggerated, and somewhat ludicrous, lacking relatability in its own sense. Seeking to better understand the process of establishing audience sympathy towards queer characters, I looked to an original paper by Goran Madžarević and María T. Soto-Sanfiel. “Positive Representation of Gay Characters in Movies for Reducing Homophobia” explores how representation of LGBTQ individuals on the movie screen affects viewers’ levels of homophobia, and the relationship between homophobia reduction and character identification. Unsurprisingly, their results point to a negative correlation: “the higher the degree of identification, the lower the level of homophobia” (Madžarević and Soto-Sanfiel 923). In their discussion of character identification, Madžarević and Soto-Sanfiel focus on three factors, derived from previous studies by J. Igarua: 1) Cognitive empathy, the ability to understand the perspective of the character and adopt their viewpoint; 2) Emotional empathy, the extent to which the viewer feels concern for the character or feels what they feel; and 3) Merging, the sense of becoming the character, representing the “degree to which a recipient of a narrative has the sensation of... adopting their personal motivations” (Madžarević and Soto-Sanfiel 911). Looking for manifestations of these three factors in “You Need to Calm Down”

allows us a clearer sense of the ways in which its characters both pull the audience in and push us away.

Quite obvious are the efforts to steer the audience *away* from identification with the protestors. On a cognitive level, even homophobic viewers would find relating to the protestor's declarations difficult. One sign reads "morans" instead of "morons," another "homasekualty," and a third is held entirely upside-down (Swift). This obviously reflects poorly on the protestors' holistic movement, making them appear entirely ignorant. Emotionally, their depiction as irrationally angry and highly obtrusive fosters an immediate sense of scorn, the derision displayed by Swift then bringing the same satisfaction as the reprimand of an extremely obnoxious child. Any possibility of putting oneself in the protestors shoes is destroyed by their distasteful appearance and the seeming discontent that comes from being on their side of the fence.

Yet, it cannot go unnoticed that the residents' contrasting displays of carefree celebration lack a certain relatability of their own. Undoubtedly, they maintain the emotional upper hand with their pointed displays of keeping cool, with Swift's declarations that "I've learned a lesson" and "snakes and stones never broke my bones" painting her as level-headed and reasonable (Swift). But while it is easy to feel aligned with the residents' viewpoint, garnering an intellectual understanding of their lifestyle is harder. Many residents push past the boundary of silliness into nonsensicality, watering plastic lawns or putting cotton candy in a blender. They engage in stereotypically frivolous actions too childish to feel authentic from a sexually mature adult, like hula-hooping or having a decked-out tea party. Even moments that reference more legitimate aspects of queer culture, such as transgender romance or gay marriage, are exaggerated to the point of feeling like impersonation. This level of theatricality, immaturity, and

nonsensicality places a lens of fictitiousness over the trailer-park world. To cite Madžarević and Soto-Sanfiel's terminology, cognitive empathy is made impossible by the residents' nonsensical exaggerations, and their farcical lifestyle is nearly impossible to "merge into." The trailer-park world, feeling like a play-act, reads accordingly as an illegitimate testament to any sort of genuine culture. Thus, the queer world as it is portrayed in "You Need to Calm Down" is stylish and fun, certainly, but lacking in authentic identity, missing the seriousness required for it to feel human.

This lack of relatability may be largely attributable to Swift's take on a "Camp" aesthetic. In "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag describes Camp as a mode of aestheticism that focuses not on beauty but on stylization – "the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (Sontag). Camp inherently eludes definition, Sontag explains, as it has an esoteric nature where "to talk about Camp is therefore to betray it" (Sontag). But while Camp's extravagance cannot be taken seriously "because it is 'too much,'" it must also be proposed seriously to be true (Sontag). Though Camp extends far beyond queer culture, the LGBTQ community has often been its vanguard, and many artists have drawn upon Camp when addressing topics of gender and sexuality. Lady Gaga, famous throughout Swift's early career, was known to perform Camp in her more transgressive videos, and many scholars have analyzed both her use of Camp and its effectiveness. I wish to draw upon "Camp Revamped in Pop Culture Icon Lady Gaga: The case of 'Telephone' and 'Born this Way'" by José M. Yebra to aid in my understanding of Camp as used by Swift.

Citing Sontag's "Notes on Camp," Yebra asserts that Gaga's videos cannot be considered authentic Camp, as they are "too controlled, too calculating, too self-aware" (Yebra 41). Yebra instead categorizes "Born this Way" and "Telephone" under a subCamp initially addressed by J.

Robertson called “Pop-Camp,” or Camp that is “appropriated after the consumption logic of pop culture” and recognizes “consumerism and desire for access to the dominant culture” (Yebra 40, 41). Yebra identifies Pop-Camp in Gaga’s videos largely through the visible scattering of product placements, most notably her “heartbeats headphones” (a line of Beats Headphones designed by Gaga herself). A similar manifestation can be spotted in Swift’s video through her frequent self-referential “Easter eggs.” The phone that catches fire is shown to have a case with “Lover” written on it in the same font and color as Swift’s album cover. Hints to other songs on *Lover* are scattered throughout, left for her fans to puzzle over. Even louder acknowledgements of pop-culture are her references to personal celebrity drama (like the “pop queen pageant” of artists previously pitted against Swift, or the public conclusion of her Katy Perry feud), not to mention the celebrity-stacked cast itself. While the absurdism within Swift’s Camp certainly makes a case for escaping from rationalism and societal restrictions, her self-awareness and acknowledgment of mainstream culture knocks her solidly into Pop-Camp, as she uses consumption strategies to package both brand products as well as the celebrities associated with them.

Furthermore, both Gaga’s and Swift’s lyrics hold them back from achieving authentic Camp by employing the logic of mainstream culture. In Gaga’s video, lyrics like “there’s nothin’ wrong with lovin’ who you are” appear as a juxtaposition to her transgressive imagery (Yebra 51). After displaying a series of genderless monsters that challenge human shapes, her words prove contrastingly politically correct when they encourage self-tolerance and the strength to overcome the shame of being “other” to become “normal” instead. Yebra explains, “The video is thus torn between camp excess and a politics of toleration and inclusion,” one that ultimately promotes normalizing the unaccepted (51). In Swift’s video, she tells her online haters that

“we’ve figured you out, we all know now, we all got crowns,” an idea visualized when the drag-pageant crown is tossed abandoned into the air (Swift). Though the notion of everyone being equally beautiful is familiar and admirable, in this context it is problematic. This is because Swift’s desirable trait in “You Need to Calm Down,” the “crown” that is shared by Swift and her cohorts is their celebration of queer culture. The residents represent the beauty of transgressive difference, and to make that accessible and comparable to the non-queer is to ultimately normalize their transgressivity. To normalize queerness in this way, to limit its unconventionality so that it might be packaged in a medium familiar to us through pop culture reference and logic of acceptance, is actually detrimental to achievement of true acceptance and equality. It suggests that we only celebrate queer culture as it exists within the familiar, within our pre-existing logic—that queerness can only exist within the boundaries of heteronormativity.

A similar argument on the effects of positioning homosexuality within pop culture conventions is made by Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow in their article “Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces: *Will and Grace* and the Situation Comedy Genre.” *Will and Grace*, the first show to offer a gay male lead on US broadcast television, is frequently analyzed within discussions of queer representation in media. The situational comedy was applauded for its positive representation of gay men, but Battles and Hilton-Morrow reject “the assumption that the mere representation of gay men in primetime television necessarily reflects a huge shift in societal attitudes towards gays and lesbians in America” (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 89). Rather, they argue that “by inviting viewers to read the program within familiar televisual frames, *Will & Grace* can be read as reinforcing heterosexism and, thus, can be seen as heteronormative” (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 89). In their establishment of *Will and Grace* as existing within normative pop culture, they bring to light multiple conventions that I believe translate to “You

Need to Calm Down.” I wish to focus largely on two factors, infantilization and emphasis on interpersonal relations, to reinforce the notion that Swift’s video, despite its pro-LGBTQ intentions, is ultimately heteronormative.

Battles and Hilton-Morrow cite multiple examples of *Will and Grace* infantilizing gay and pro-gay characters, focusing on those that highlight obliviousness and goofiness. We find many childlike moments like these in “You Need to Calm Down,” like the theatrical reaction of one celebrity playing archery, or another being hand-fed a piece of candy. In fact, all appearing food items in Swift’s video are colorful and sweet, a little kid’s dream. Furthermore, the residents’ eccentric, mismatched outfits distinctly evoke a sense of “dress-up.” While the residents may call into question dominant cultural ideologies regarding gender and sexuality, this is “limited by their placement in the narrative,” their familiar role of child or buffoon indicating that “such a sensibility need not be taken seriously by the mainstream audience” (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 97-98).

Even more limiting is “an emphasis on characters’ interpersonal relationships rather than the characters’ connections to the larger social world” (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 101). This is most apparent in the setting of Swift’s video, a self-enclosed trailer park village. This context confines our focus to the extremified and limited set of relationships existing within the trailer-park world. The result of this is a failure to acknowledge those who fit into the queer narrative but not into the video’s limited cast, likely the majority of her viewers. Furthermore, it allows us to ignore the realistic social consequences of LGBTQ persons living in our heterosexist culture (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 99). Yes, the trailer park world is itself fictitious; however, the social issue it manipulates is intended to be considered seriously by the audience. The emphasis of queer celebration as a personal lifestyle and a responsibility encourages viewers to believe that

“an individual’s personal rejection of homophobic attitudes equals the improved social standing of sexual minorities” (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 102). We are allowed to feel proud of our inclusive stance without really considering the more realistic compromises forced upon queer individuals living in a heteronormative culture.

While I do think that Swift’s efforts to promote queer acceptance are genuine, I also contend that, in many ways, “You Need to Calm Down” could better achieve this goal. It is understandable to use theatricality and lightheartedness as a way to make a serious topic more approachable. However, Swift greatly diminishes the effectiveness of this tactic by choosing to also include her personal celebrity drama in the narrative, distracting from the essential issue of queer acceptance and also trivializing seriously harmful homophobia by grouping it together with superficial celebrity in-fighting. Furthermore, the highly stereotyped and binary images central throughout “You Need to Calm Down” are almost entirely unrelatable, and thus hinder a broader audience from recognizing its role within the world of queer rights (since we all do play one) and its resulting capacity to create change. Swift’s video points to egregious and conspicuous acts of homophobia, but my paper seeks to acknowledge that homophobia exists within more discreet contexts just as strongly. “You Need to Calm Down,” as it is framed within heteronormative conventions, is *itself* an unknowing party to subtle homophobia. Though its content may suggest that anti-queer efforts can be easily ridiculed and regulated, the video more than anything exemplifies just how complex and challenging the issue of homophobia truly is.

Yet can we truly expect Swift, a pop culture icon, to escape from the heteronormative mainstream? One could argue that framing the issue within pop culture conventions is what allows her to provide a positive representation of LGBTQs that is palatable for her mainstream audience, creating a space for increased media visibility that unfortunately comes at a price

(Battles and Hilton-Morrow 101). I challenge that notion. Swift tells those speaking against the queer community to “calm down,” that they’re “being too loud”; but do Swift and her celebrity friends not have one of the loudest voices of all? Do they not, as pop culture icons, have more power than most to reshape the mainstream? It is no coincidence that the cast of the trailer park is comprised of pop singers, television stars, talk-show hosts, Olympians, models, and more. As well-known and well-watched people, they are assuredly more likely to be well-heard. So do they not, as pop culture icons, have more power than most to reshape the mainstream?

Swift ends her video with a call to action, and I would do the same – to those who would sign Swift’s petition, who expect that “our laws truly treat all of our citizens equally,” we must ask ourselves: are we, too, guilty of being first and foremost interested in “fun”? Do we exploit an inclusive stance, supporting the rights of others only while it is easy, rewarding, or enjoyable? We point fingers at tweets and at protesters, but if such obvious anti-queer content were to end, what homophobia would still be left ingrained in our social systems and in us? What are we doing to ensure that the fight against homophobia, quiet and loud, never calms down?

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