



# Hilltopics



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# Waves of Activism: Young People Inspiring Change Today

LAMISA MUSTAFA

TO ME THERE ARE FEW THINGS IN LIFE more beautiful than a room of close-to-300 people, from all walks of life, gathered to learn about human rights activism from each other. What's more awe-inspiring is that this group was primarily made of high school students, gathered at SMU on a Saturday morning during their summer vacation.

This event was known as the Human Rights Youth Summit, the first of its kind in Dallas, organized by SMU's Embrey Human Rights Program (EHRP) and the World Affairs Council of Dallas-Fort Worth. I was both an observer (assessing the success of the program) and a participant (learning about human rights with other young people). What brought me great pride that day (and makes me proud everyday) was that I would be joining the EHRP as a human rights major.

I was elated to be attending the program with my Newman Smith High School Human Rights Forum (HRF) family. Our organization focuses on outlets through which students can inspire a shared sense of humanity among our community. After a field trip to SMU last year, our forum was forming a partnership with the EHRP that ultimately culminated into this Summit.

Lisa Walters-Vargas, the Community Outreach Coordinator of the EHRP, was pivotal to making this event a success. She told me that our HRF sparked questions among the EHRP team about how they could be more involved in high schools and start necessary conversations about human rights well before college; they wanted to fill in gaps of youth engagement in global issues. I believe this event did just that and more—it equipped youth and educators all around DFW with knowledge and tools essential to social activism.

Highlights from the event include a speed-networking session with prominent social activists based in DFW, poetry by Dr. Candice Bledsoe about the black experience in America, live painting by Riley Holloway, and student reflections on steps that could be taken right away to help communities in need. The event embodied the idea that "if you can act on an issue here in Dallas, then you can do it everywhere else." I hope that like me, other student attendees felt empowered to take action because of this event.

Hope Anderson, a recent human rights graduate and the first recipient of its Post-baccalaureate Fellowship, is leading the path forward. Looking back on the Summit two months later, Hope

believes the event made us realize that human rights efforts are "most effective with a variety of voices, pushers, and movers," which should *include* and not "tokenize" young people. Moreover, she thinks that young people should stop believing that all "-isms" can wait to be tackled until after college. We really need to decide what side we are on *now*; I fundamentally believe that neutrality is equivalent to being on the side of the oppressor. To me, human rights advocacy is the best gateway to discover how we can be upstanding global citizens in our own ways.

In light of the recent violence in Charlottesville, Hope asserts that human rights violations and hate groups are "just as accessible and destructive today" as they were during the Holocaust and Jim Crow. Human rights education is meant to be "a platform to interrupt [the hateful] rhetoric" and it should make us realize that the "other" has rights as valid as our own.

Everyone has something that touches them and gets them going every morning; human rights activism is about, as Hope passionately says, "connect[ing] your own story to a larger [human] narrative." It's about

*human rights activism is about... "connect[ing] your own story to a larger [human] narrative."*

“taking power into your own hands, making connections happen, [developing an] on-the-ground understanding... [and fostering] real world skills.”

Dr. Rick Halperin, the Director of the EHRP and a personal human rights hero of mine, puts into perspective what human rights scholarship means in this moment in history: “Human rights education should be offered throughout all American educational levels, from grades K through university... [T]his country is in dire need of a younger generation with more knowledge and understanding of human rights and our responsibilities [toward] ALL people, regardless of who they are.”

At the Summit, he passionately affirmed that “if you believe in human rights, then you believe that there is no such thing as a lesser person—no exceptions.” To me, there is no greater truth than this. At the heart of human rights is the belief

that *all* human beings are born with fundamental rights that cannot be taken away.

Dr. Halperin is often referred to as the face of human rights in Dallas; but to him, “without a doubt, students are the most inspiring part of this program.” He believes he’s incredibly “fortunate in getting to meet, work with and mentor young, idealistic, passionate and creative students who want to be the agents of change for a just... society.”

As I begin my journey in one of the few undergraduate human rights programs in the US and the only one of its kind in the South, I often think of when Cecily Cox, a student leader in the EHRP, told me and a group of first-year human rights majors and minors that we are “so lucky to be learning human rights *now*... right now in this country. This has never been more

important.” I wholeheartedly agree—I believe that human rights education is quintessential to realizing that we are all bigger than ourselves. Perpetrators of injustice do seem to have the most powerful voices right now, but I am impatiently waiting to see the work that this program and all champions of human rights will accomplish in the very near future.

In joining our journey, you’ll find an outlet to shape your own identity and transform society for the better. After all, human rights include *all* people. Every person’s unique light is important to our human rights story—I hope that you’ll share and embrace yours.

IMAGE COURTESY OF RILEY HOLLOWAY’S ARTWORK, “EQUAL RIGHTS FOR ALL!”, WHICH WAS PAINTED LIVE AT THE HUMAN RIGHTS YOUTH SUMMIT ON JULY 15TH, 2017. PHOTO TAKEN BY LAMISA MUSTAFA.

up when my friends wanted to go do things, and I had to say no because we didn’t have any money and no way to get there. I missed out on a lot of things—I felt trapped.

**Student 2:** No. The only people we told were very close family friends. We never wanted to tell people because being homeless makes you an outsider. It also causes a shift in the power dynamic in a relationship, and some of our friendships never recovered from that. When people help you, you’re all of a sudden beneath them.

**Did you get any help from the government while you were homeless?**

**Student 1:** No.

**Student 2:** No.

**How do you feel being at SMU now, where most people can’t relate to your experiences?**

**Student 1:** Alienated. Lots of people here grew up knowing [that] they could ask for anything, and I always feared that I would ask for too much. I still feel that way, like we don’t have

## *Evicted: the SMU Version*

LORIEN MELNICK

*In honor of the SMU common reading book, Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City by Matthew Desmond, SMU students were interviewed about their experiences with homelessness.*

**What was your experience with being homeless?**

**Student 1:** When I was little, my parents couldn’t afford housing, so we were forced into my mom’s parents’ house. Usually in Hispanic families, no one lives on the streets; they’re taken in by family. The experience helped me to appreciate family more and made me very reliant on my family, even now that we’re not homeless anymore. I’ll always remember how, when I was little, I always really wanted candy bars, but even [the] candy that was twenty-five cents, they said was too

expensive. One day, after we moved out of my grandparents’ house, I asked for a candy bar, and my parents said yes. That’s always stuck with me.

**Student 2:** When you’re homeless, you always feel like you don’t really have an anchor or belong anywhere, like you’re floating. Home is a place where you can be yourself, and when you don’t have a home, you have to find that familiarity in somewhere else. Because we didn’t have a place to relax, my mom and I became each other’s home. We’re really close now, and I see that as one of the highlights of our experience.

**While you were homeless, did other people in your life (classmates, teachers, parents’ coworkers) know about it?**

**Student 1:** Not really. It only came

enough, whereas people around me always seem to have too much.

*Student 2:* To be honest, it wasn't until I got to SMU that I admitted to myself that I was ever homeless at all. I always thought that the word "homeless" was for people who lived under a bridge. I thought that, since we had friends and places to stay, we weren't homeless. Once, though, we were over at a family friend's. Their son was a little older than me, and he asked, "Mom, why are these hoboes here?" For a while, I tried not to acknowledge that that ever happened.

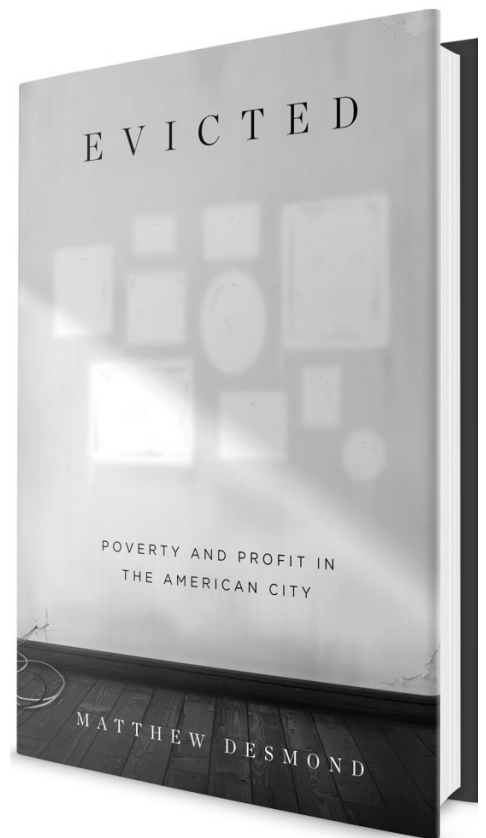
*Why do you think it's important that students at SMU learn about homelessness?*

*Student 1:* Because it's a very real issue, and it's swept under the rug a lot. A lot of people think that the only ones who are homeless are the ones who live on the street, begging for money. But there [are] a lot of people who don't have a real home, but who live in some kind of housing or shelter, and they often can't get government help. We need to continue talking about it, so that people

understand these issues are more diverse than you might think.

*Student 2:* Most people here have had no contact with this issue and have no idea what it's like. Going through this experience taught me about how much worse it could have been. In the moment, there was always something off about the situation, but I was never absolutely miserable.

It's such a big part of who I became, and most people here have never gone through that experience. Everyone has problems, but having something disturb your home is on such a different level that it's impossible to understand. *Evicted* was such a good book because it put faces to the issue. Some people tell me, "But I couldn't keep the characters straight," and I think that reflects the general view of the issue. To lots of people, homelessness is just a general mass of people who don't have personalities and lives. *Evicted* is important because it gives identities to homeless people so that readers can sympathize with them.



increasing the level of harshness in our criminal justice system.

So, why do many Americans feel so strongly about making sure criminals are punished rather than rehabilitated? The answer to that question is complicated, but one explanation could stem from a human desire for order. People tend to feel more comfortable knowing that there is some sort of higher power present to restore balance when things go awry. Whether it be a deity or a government, many find comfort in the idea that the forces of said entity will eventually deliver justice to those who disrupt order. Rehabilitation often fails to satisfy this desire for vengeful justice. Harsh punishments, on the other hand, can create a grand display out of revenge. This is part of the reason it becomes difficult to repeal what some view as the ultimate punishment—the death penalty. The philosophy of "an eye for an eye" is exceptionally attractive to many, and it can become

## *From Crime to Cruelty*

ALEC MASON

THE RECENT PRESIDENTIAL PARDON of former Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio raised quite a few eyebrows across the political spectrum. Arizona senator John McCain claimed that the pardon "undermines [the president's] claim for the respect of the rule of law." While the charges against Arpaio for refusing to follow a court order to end his racial profiling of Latino people are undoubtedly awful, I am not going to dedicate this article to debating his conviction nor his pardoning. Rather, I wish to briefly discuss the problematic ethics of the criminal justice policy that leads many conservatives to admire him — his toughness on crime and lack of sympathy for criminals.

Arpaio is undeniably an extreme case in

criminal justice policy, so I will avoid creating a strawman by claiming that anyone who prefers to be tough on crime wants to go as far as he did. However, the problem lies in that it becomes exceedingly difficult to be tough on crime while respecting human rights and eschewing cruel punishments. Research suggests that harsh punishments may have no benefit other than making those on the outside have a sense of vengeance. In fact, research done by the solicitor general of Canada showed a slight increase in recidivism rates among those with harsher punishments for the same crime.<sup>1</sup> The data calls into question the reasoning for the general American support<sup>2</sup> for maintaining or

nearly impossible to resist the desire to inflict equal suffering on those who committed a crime.

This leads us to a struggle that can define the moral standing of an entire civilization. A society is far better off if its population can look past its animalistic longing for vengeance to instead embrace the ideas of forgiveness and rehabilitation. Those who commit crimes are often at one of the lowest points in their lives, and around 15-20% of those in prison are mentally ill.<sup>3</sup> Can we truly claim to be at a higher moral standing than criminals if we inflict such inhumane suffering on some of the most unfortunate people in our society? In my opinion, no. We absolutely cannot. As a society, we need to take a step back and reevaluate the goal of a criminal justice system. We should resist the will for revenge and instead work towards a humane, rehabilitative system. Our goal should not be to make those who commit crimes live in tents that reach temperatures of 145°F in the sweltering Arizona heat as Joe Arpaio

did.<sup>4</sup> Nor should our goal be to murder those who commit murder. Rather, our focus in designing an effective criminal justice system should be to reduce recidivism by preparing prisoners for an eventual return as a productive member of society.

Of course, none of these reforms can happen without a movement in our democracy towards candidates who respect human rights and prioritize rehabilitation. We must be wary of candidates like Joe Arpaio who emphasize rigid, unsympathetic enforcement of law and order above all else. Therefore, we cannot sit silently as our systems and leaders practice cruelty towards prisoners, lest our moral standing be diminished as well.

## FOOTNOTES:

- 1) <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/pnshnt-rcdvsm/index-en.aspx>
- 2) <http://www.gallup.com/poll/196568/americans-views-shift-toughness-justice-system.aspx>
- 3) <http://www.apa.org/monitor/julaug03/rehab.aspx>
- 4) <http://www.thedailybeast.com/inmates-left-to-rot-in-120-degree-heat>



# The Cape

KEVIN WANG

*We felt the Cape, deserted, silent, cold.  
The early summer rain brought back the breeze  
of winter's deed. You hid your heart of gold  
inside your cloak as if it were to freeze.  
The yonder sea sang songs of her own beach  
of beauty; yet, I heard the gloomy song  
of falling rain and saw our growing breach  
between our lips, our hearts, our journeys long.  
But Love, could you not hear the rhythms of  
the gorgeous sea whose waves were kissing our  
own feet? Our hearts united with the dove  
who sought with hope another sunny hour.  
One day we'd walk and feel the Cape again  
to kiss the waves with lasting love's reign.*

"THE CAPE"

ORIGINAL PHOTO BY KEVIN WANG

## Freshman Year: Lessons Learned and Memories Made

KAREN GUAN

ONE OF THE HARDEST THINGS FOR ME to do, even as a writer, is to bring my idea as to life, or at least to this Google Doc. However, as someone who just crossed the threshold from freshman to sophomore not too long ago, reflecting on what has become the most important year of my life is pretty much inevitable. At this time in 2016, I, like virtually every other first-year student at SMU, had absolutely no idea what I was doing. However, as the year progressed I managed to accomplish a few things, made a few (okay, many) mistakes, and learned a few lessons along

the way.

Here are four of the most important pieces of advice I have for first-year students, which you are, by no means, forced to comply with. You do you, fam.

1. The Feeling of Wanting to Do Everything: From the day we officially commit to SMU (and lose several hundred dollars thanks to that infamous deposit), we are constantly advised and coerced to get involved with clubs, organizations, and basically

anything legal. As a first-year student, I took that piece of advice very seriously, to the point where I was overwhelmed by the seemingly endless possibilities. If you reach that point, and if you are a naive little overachiever (like me) you most definitely will, then a time will come when you'll be forced to ask yourself where your interests truly lie, and you'll know to follow your passions, rather than the advice of strangers who still probably don't know what they're doing.

2. The Feeling of Wanting to Do Nothing: College is the first time the majority of you are on your own, which means you can basically do whatever the hell you want, whenever the hell you want. Let me tell you that that is (fortunately!) not the case. In college, one of the first things you ought to do is learn to prioritize everything in your life, from academics to extracurriculars to parties. Nowadays, the college



experience is heavily influenced by the abundance of social media in our lives, which forces people to, naturally, present a certain, and often narrow and one-dimensional, version of themselves. It's also incredibly easy to get caught up in what is perceived as the ideal, but if there's anything I can tell you about this aspect of college life, I just hope you don't try to change yourself, whether it's your personal values or even your style of dress, to fit an arbitrary standard. Remember that you're living for yourself, not societal standards.

3. The Feeling of Missing Home: Even if you're from the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex like me, or you don't feel as if there is much to look forward to in your hometown, you will begin to miss the comfort and familiarity of home. I am from Colleyville, a suburb of Fort Worth about 40 minutes west of Dallas, and to be perfectly honest, I was excited to finally leave the small, homogenous suburb and finally start my life outside of its confinement. However, there were

times last year at SMU when I felt so confused, anxious, and alone that all I wanted to do was to return to the bubble of familiarity I had known for years. But I had to continue to move forward and push through the struggles and move forward because I didn't want to live with the regret of knowing I could have done something had I tried just a little harder. And I'm sure you don't want to either.

4. The Feeling of Everything and Nothing All At Once: I know this sounds incredibly vague, and if you want to stop reading my advice because I've confused you, go ahead. But I purposely kept the title vague because it leads to my discussion of a somewhat vague, which is that of mental health. However, the definition of mental health should be pretty obvious to you, and because I am not a professor, I'll skip the formal definition and just tell you my personal belief that mental health should be personal to everyone. Not only that, but it is an

aspect of your wellbeing you should not ignore, especially when you are undergoing a lot of changes in virtually every aspect of life. Looking back, my mental health was the one thing I should have taken more seriously as a first-year student, and now that I am a sophomore, the consequences of not doing so have caught up to me...which is why I cannot stress how important it is to take care of yourself, or at least to try. Don't be afraid to slow down, even when it seems like no one else will.

College can be exciting, confusing, and terrifying all at once, but I hope the wisdom I've imparted upon you, as well as the mistakes I've made, will serve you well in the present and the future. Class of 2021, your first year really will end too fast, so don't be afraid to be spontaneous, make dumb mistakes, and create memories you'll hold onto for the rest of your life.

OFFICIAL CLASS PHOTO OF SMU CLASS OF 2021  
TAKEN ON AUGUST 19, 2017



# Positivity During Hurricane Harvey

MAHESH RAMGOPAL

AS HURRICANE HARVEY POUNDED THE Houston area, the American people were inundated with numbers on the lives lost and the damage caused. However, few people knew what the day-to-day struggles the people of Houston were, and still are, facing. To help solve this issue, I contacted my friend in Houston, Megan Welty, and tried to understand what she was going through.

## **How are you doing? How are you handling all of this?**

We're doing pretty good. We've moved almost everything—at least everything of value—from my first floor up into my second floor. There [are] washers and dryers, my refrigerator, my entire kitchen. You know, everything is upstairs in case the levee fails or breaks—which the river hasn't crested yet. It will crest Friday sometime, and that's when we will know if our levee is safe or not.

## **If the levee does break, what's going to happen?**

There will be water at least as high as my cabinets in my house. And I mean, I live at the other end of my neighborhood, so everyone closer, even if they have a second floor, that would be ruined. When

they had their prediction of 59 feet, we were terrified. We thought it was gonna be up to my second floor.

## **So what's the prediction now?**

Right now, they're saying the highest it will be will be 57.9 feet, and I believe, right now, we are around 55 feet, [which is] the highest it's been ever before. We had Memorial [Day] flood last year and that terrified us, [and] that was almost at the top of our levee. So, it's even higher. The police today shut people off from going to the levee. I was gonna check on it because we went last night, and it was really high. But, we had a couple feet of clearance last night, so we still have...all of today and part of tomorrow to wait. And we are so lucky I'm...floodgate 11. That's my levee number. And that's the only levee that has put above and beyond effort into making [it]. Everyone else's has been mandatory evacuation. Houses flooded. The levee on the other side of the river...broke yesterday, and their houses are gone. They're ruined. Which I mean is horrible, but that provides relief to my levee.

## **So a lot of people know about the**

**physical damage that Houston is experiencing, but a lot of us don't really understand the emotional toll it's taking on people like you. Could you elaborate on that?**

I am beyond fortunate that no one I love has been lost to [the] flooding. I have several friends and family that have lost their house. My grandpa, he lost his house. But that's not a problem. We know how to build houses. Thank god, [he] and his wife got out. My brother's girlfriend, they had to leave their dog in the rush of the flood. That was pretty hard for their family. It's really hard, a lot of people...are being hurt, losing their lives, losing their houses, losing everything, but at least we still have each other. And the great thing is, last night I was watching the news, and there were hundreds and hundreds of cop cars from San Antonio and Dallas and everywhere, and yeah, it's a hard time, but it's great because this is when people are bonding together. My school was opened as a shelter, and everyone who could make it out of the neighborhood, made their way to volunteer. There [are] lines for volunteering. And there [are] lines for donations.

## **In all of these difficult times, what is giving you happiness and hope?**

Well, it was actually funny, so the first two days before the flooding actually started it was a lot of tornados and rain. My fence in my backyard is gone. Trees are down. And then the flooding first started. And, our neighbors and I...we aren't great friends. But we got a canoe out, and we started playing around in the circle. ...My dad is always beyond busy. He never has time for the family. But it was really nice because we spent an entire day outside and laughing and having fun.



ORIGINAL PHOTO BY MAHESH RAMGOPAL

# Look What the Media Made Swift Do

NICOLE KISER

“LOOK WHAT YOU MADE ME DO” BY Taylor Swift is a record-breaking song. The song broke Spotify’s record for number of first-day streams and for most streams by one song in a single day. It also broke the record for number of first-day plays on YouTube and is currently the No. 1 song in the country (Flanagan).

Honestly, I hate it. I don’t think it is a good song, but I also don’t think it matters if it’s a good song.

Despite the general ambiguity of the actual lyrics, the pointedness of some of the symbols in the music video and the tendencies of the media to sensationalize everything Swift were bound to send the song to No. 1. The capacity for speculation and interpretation was too large.

Some of the symbols in the music video are easily interpreted to align with Swift’s various feuds and media run-ins. In the music video’s opening scene, one of the gravestones has the name “Nils Sjoberg” engraved—the pseudonym Swift used when she co-wrote “This Is What You Came For” with her then boyfriend, Calvin Harris. The pseudonym’s use eventually led to Swift and Harris’ breakup and some tense tweets from Harris. In another example, the many snakes that accompany Swift throughout the video appear to reference the incident between the Wests and Swift. On Instagram, Swift posted disparaging remarks about the couple and their use of her in “Famous,” after which Kim Kardashian West released an edited phone call of Swift appearing to approve Kanye West’s line about her in his song “Famous.” Kardashian West’s actions led to many posting the snake emoji on Swift’s social media, calling her a manipulator and liar. The overall tone of the music video uses symbols from her past media scandals to

show Swift as manipulative and overly ambitious.

However, the deeper I fell down the rabbit hole of Taylor Swift gossip and tabloid trash, the more I realized how shallow all the “scandals” were. Much of what was said about Swift included indefinites: “seem,” “maybe,” and “perhaps.” I was tired of the media jumping to conclusions, and *I was not the one in the article*.

The music video of “Look What You Made Me Do” ends with Taylor Swift as she was from the 2009 VMAs (where Kanye interrupted her award speech, beginning their infamous feud) saying, “I would very much like to be excluded from this narrative.” While the music video of “Look What You Made Me Do” embraces—and exaggerates—the media narrative forced on Swift, the lyrics create a different narrative. From the very title—“Look What You Made Me Do”—there is a narrative of victimization. The idea of having been *made* to do something, being forced into action against your will, allows Swift to carefully cultivate an image of innocence being stripped. The pre-chorus circulates around the idea of “I got smarter, I got harder,” emphasizing how her very public life forced the construction of a jaded worldview “in

the nick of time.” The themes of loss and cynicism are further emphasized in the bridge when Swift repeats, “I don’t trust nobody and nobody trusts me.” The quote shows Swift as cynical in that she trusts no one, and it shows her as a victim in that no one trusts her, both sentiments molded by how the media portrays her. Even the hyperbolic “I’m sorry, the old Taylor can’t come to the phone right now. Why? Oh, ‘cause she’s dead!” sets up Swift as a victim of some crime.

The danger of Swift’s careful narrative of victimization is already displayed in comment sections from YouTube to Tumblr. While some think she is a victim of the cruelty of the media and stardom, others see her as playing the victim in order to cover-up for her less-than-graceful media slipups. Can we really know whether her victimhood is real or fabricated? The current split in audience between those who see Swift as petty and those who see her as empowered is fairly equally divided. The majority cares more about her music than her life in the tabloids. In the end, her freedom as an artist means she can write whatever she wants, no matter what we as an audience think of it, but her popularity means we *will* think of it.

EVEN THOUGH I REALLY HATE THAT SONG.

## WORKS CITED

Flanagan, Andrew. “Taylor Swift’s ‘Look What You Made Me Do’ Breaks Records, Stops ‘Despacito’ Short.” *NPR*, NPR, 5 Sept. 2017. [www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2017/09/05/548624239/taylor-swifts-look-what-you-made-me-do-breaks-records-stops-despacito-short](http://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2017/09/05/548624239/taylor-swifts-look-what-you-made-me-do-breaks-records-stops-despacito-short). Accessed 5 Sept. 2017.

## IMAGE COURTESY OF:

[www.popsugar.com/celebrity/Taylor-Swift-Look-What-You-Made-Me-Do-Video-Meaning-43944635](http://www.popsugar.com/celebrity/Taylor-Swift-Look-What-You-Made-Me-Do-Video-Meaning-43944635). Accessed 5 Sept. 2017.





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