PERSONAL OR POLITICAL? HETERONORMATIVITY AND THE POWER OF COMING OUT

CHRISTINE PIAZZA

Today, he is one of America's most prominent LGBT political leaders, but in 2015 Pete Buttigieg was simply the privately gay mayor of a small Indiana city—until he announced his sexuality publicly in an op-ed in the *South Bend Tribune*. Overnight, he became the first openly gay elected official in Indiana, and the residents of South Bend had a lot to say about it. The day after his op-ed was published, the *South Bend Tribune* ran another article titled "Pete Buttigieg's announcement creates a buzz: Most say they support South Bend mayor coming out." In the midst of positive responses from other community leaders, though, one ambivalent voice stood out. Erin Blasko reported for the *Tribune*:

> Despite personal objections to homosexuality, Kelly Jones, the mayor's Republican opponent, applauded him.
>
> "Good for him for having the bits to come out of the closet, because not everyone is willing to come out," Jones said.
>
> Jones said her personal view on homosexuality is that it is a sin, "but . . . I have several family members and friends that are gay and I could personally care less about their sexuality."
>
> She described the issue as irrelevant to the ongoing mayoral race. (Blasko)

At first glance, this response is an odd combination of homophobia ("homosexuality . . . is a sin") and praise ("Jones . . . applauded him"), but, examined more closely, it can illuminate how heteronormativity works when confronted with queerness it cannot ignore.

What do we make of this statement in which Jones addresses her difference from Buttigieg? In her essay "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Re-defining Difference," Audre Lorde describes a three-pronged approach to dealing with difference, writing, "we have *all* been programmed to respond to human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate" (115). Certainly, given Jones' view that "homosexuality . . . is a sin," she is not trying to copy or adopt her opponent's orientation (qtd. in Blasko). Nevertheless, despite her "personal objections" and "personal view," Jones does not seem to be trying to destroy Mayor Pete's individual sexuality (Blasko). Indeed, rather than being obviously destructive, on the surface her comments range from neutral ("I personally could care less") to encouraging ("Good for him") (Blasko).

Can we say, then, that Jones is ignoring Mayor Pete's sexuality? Her belief that his orientation is "irrelevant to the ongoing mayoral race" makes this conclusion tempting, but Jones's comment in itself is only dismissing the potential political ramifications of Pete's queerness, not his queerness itself (Blasko). In fact, it is Buttigieg's supporters whose markedly vague language exposes them to the charge of ignoring his sexuality. For example, the city council leader celebrated Buttigieg's ability "to be who he is" while lamenting that "there are some people that might think of *it* as a negative" (Blasko, emphasis mine). The use of the pronoun "it" instead of its implied antecedent—possibly a phrase like "coming out," "being gay," "his orientation," or "his sexuality"—would seem trivial, except that this hesitation to name the issue at hand is repeated throughout Blasko's article. Taken out of context, almost every supportive quote in the article might just as well be referring to any other contentious social issue. In contrast, Jones's frank references to "com[ing] out of the closet," to her friends and family members "that are gay," and her views on their "sexuality" are unmistakably part of a discussion of gay rights. In fact, beyond one reference to the "LGBT community" from someone described as "an outspoken member of the LGBT community," Jones is the *only* person quoted in the article to use the words "gay," "sexuality," or "closet." Thus, one can hardly accuse Jones of ignoring the mayor's sexuality when her quote is one of the only statements, among those that Blasko includes in this article, that unambiguously names the issue at hand. Despite Lorde's claim that we deal with difference by copying, destroying, or ignoring it, Jones does not appear to be doing any of these.

However, Jones is sexualizing Buttigieg and thereby de-politicizing the act of coming out. While one certainly cannot fault Jones for using the words "gay" and "sexuality," the phrase "having the bits to come out" is unnecessarily sexual; "having the courage to come out" or "having the boldness to come out" would have conveyed the same sentiment, but Jones did not choose these more common expressions. Her odd reference to the mayor's genitals is particularly jarring when compared to the remarks of others quoted in Blasko's article, who apparently prefer vague references to "terrible barriers" and "divisive issues" rather than the simple word "gay." Furthermore, even compared to other sexual terms Jones could have used, "the bits" is particularly effective in sexualizing the act of coming out. If Jones had said she was glad Pete "had the balls" to come out, it would have passed as a common and crude idiom. However, "having the bits" is a sufficiently unusual phrase that it arrests the audience's attention, focusing their awareness on the unexpected word "bits." In fact, it is this surprising phrase which regrettably makes Jones's quote among the most memorable ones in the article. In this context, the word even carries homophobic connotations: "bits" is frequently used in the phrases "lady bits" or "naughty bits," which here evoke the tired tropes of gay men as feminine, promiscuous, or both. Thus, Jones's language makes the act of coming out a primarily sexual announcement, an act that has more to do with "bits" than with social change.

Moreover, directing her audience's attention towards Buttigieg's genitals is just one part of Jones's larger aim: directing her audience's attention away from Buttigieg's politics. Unlike Jones, the mayor himself clearly presented his coming-out essay as an act of political power, a small but necessary part of a journey toward a day when "all the relevant laws and court decisions will be seen as steps along the path to equality" (Buttigieg). But several features of Jones's rhetoric suggest her intention to rob Buttigieg of this political power. First, she explicitly dismisses any direct political ramification, describing her opponent's announcement as "irrelevant to the ongoing mayoral race" (Blasko). Moreover, she seeks to push queerness out of the political arena altogether by re-branding her own political beliefs about queerness as merely "personal": hence the references to Jones's "personal objections to homosexuality" and "personal view . . . that it is a sin" (Blasko). Essentially, by mislabeling her own political beliefs as personal, Jones is implying that these beliefs have no impact on the outside world (which means that they are immune from challenge and debate). Finally, Jones' experiences with family and friends who have come out is separated from her politics with a third repetition of the word "personal": "I personally could care less about their sexuality" (Blasko). Although Jones may seek to signal her acceptance, her separation of the personal and the political is also a denial that her gay friends can influence her politics by coming out. Thus Jones's response works to confine queerness in general, and coming out in particular, to the realm of the sexual, strictly personal, and apolitical.

We can better understand the effect of Jones's separation of the personal and the political in light of the views of feminist critic Alison Kafer. Although Kafer's book *Feminist, Queer, Crip* is focused primarily on the intersection of feminist and queer theory with disability studies, her beliefs regarding the effects of separating the personal and the political can be transferred to other identities. First, influenced by political theorist Chantal Mouffe, Kafer defines "political" in a sense that clearly shows all marginalized identities to be inextricably political: "To say that something is 'political' in this sense means that it is implicated in relations of power and that those relations, their assumptions, and their effects are contested and contestable, open to dissent and debate" (Kafer 9). This definition of "political" highlights two important aspects of an identity like disability or sexual orientation. First, even seemingly personal interactions that are centered around this identity, like coming out or experiencing discrimination, are not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of social oppression. On the one hand, Buttigieg embraces this understanding; in fact, he explicitly shows how his orientation is "implicated in relations of power" by framing his coming-out essay as part of a larger discussion of issues such as same-sex marriage, legal employment discrimination, and high rates of LGBT teen suicide (Buttigieg). On the other hand, Jones persistently refuses to see these "relations of power"; even when she acknowledges that "not everyone is willing to come out," she is still framing the issue in terms of individual willingness instead of looking at the power of

heteronormativity to keep people in the closet (Blasko). Thus, Jones ignores Kafer's call to look at how an identity is "political" when it is part of a broader pattern of power—a power which is not derived from individual relationships, but from the power which one group has over another group.

The second piece of Kafer's definition of political is even more important: a political identity is also one whose underlying relations of power "are contested and contestable, open to dissent and debate" (Kafer 9). This builds on the first piece of Kafer's definition because social patterns of oppression can only be challenged once they are acknowledged as such. This second part of Kafer's definition means that when debate breaks out over an action such as coming out, this conversation challenges an entire structure of social hierarchy—"relations [of power], their assumptions, and their effects" (9). However, separating the political and the personal upholds the current power structures and leaves the marginalized at the whim of others' personal kindness or bigotry. Kafer writes: "attention is vital in a context in which, as Susan Schweik notes, disability-based discrimination and prejudice are often condemned not as markers of structural inequality but of cruelty or insensitivity" (10). Here, Kafer contrasts two approaches for understanding harm done to people with disabilities: either this prejudice is simply an isolated, personal flaw in the prejudiced person—or it is a symptom of something much broader, an oppressive system that has existed for millennia. The former, apolitical understanding of discrimination can be dangerous precisely because it masks larger, structural issues. The same analytic framework could be applied when examining Jones's words. In the preceding quote, Kafer discusses the alternative to classifying an identity as political; applying her analysis shows that Jones's apolitical stance actually protects structural inequality. By placing homophobia outside the political realm, Jones makes it immune from the kind of political attack which Buttigieg is trying to make. Thus, Jones's denial of the political aspects of Buttigieg's sexuality, her insistence on treating it as a purely personal matter, actually works to leave him—and all LGBT people—trapped in a framework of social injustice. If sexuality is simply a personal matter, then the LBGT community, rather than advocating for laws defending equality, must simply hope that people like Jones do not discriminate based on their "personal view on homosexuality."

While Buttigieg frames his coming out essay as a political act, Jones's language limits his announcement to a personal, even sexual, act. Applying Kafer's definition of "political" to sexual orientation shows that recognizing orientation as political is the only way to fight heteronormativity. Thus, Jones's efforts to sexualize the act of coming out and to separate the political and personal ramifications of being gay ultimately work to destroy queerness by stifling its political power.

In light of this analysis, perhaps we can see Jones's comments fitting into Lorde's three-part approach after all. When she was confronted with difference, I would argue that Jones did in fact seek to destroy it. Jones was not working to destroy Pete's individual sexuality, to force him to become straight—but, by separating the personal

from the political, she was working to destroy the power of the LGBT community as a group, an attempt to keep gay people forever subordinate. Jones's comments do not destroy difference on the individual level—they aim instead to destroy difference on a societal scale. Ultimately, the greatest political weapon of heteronormativity is its pretense of being merely personal, not political.

WORKS CITED

Blasko, Erin. "Pete Buttigieg's announcement creates a buzz: Most say they support South Bend mayor coming out." *South Bend Tribune*. June 17, 2015. www.southbendtribune.com/news/local/pete-buttigieg-s-announcement-creates-a-buzz/article_57a803f7-3aeb-50d2-9904-b69039a07ade.html.

Buttigieg, Pete. "South Bend Mayor: Why coming out matters." *South Bend Tribune*. June 16, 2015. www.southbendtribune.com/news/local/south-bend-mayor-why-coming-out-matters/article_4dce0d12-1415-11e5-83c0-739eebd623ee.html.

Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana University Press, 2013.

Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press: 1984. pp. 114-123.

CHRISTINE PIAZZA '23CC is majoring in American Studies with a concentration in Philosophy. She is involved in the Canterbury Club, Columbia's Episcopalian/Anglican student group. In her free time, she knits, crochets, and experiments with gluten-free baking.