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Expository Writing E-25

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Camelot 2.0. Encountering Otherness on the Road to the Presidency

It is a contemporary revisionist construction: Kennedyesque, he poses proudly with *his* Jackie, who just happens to be his husband. Welcome to Camelot 2.0—an updated, culturally aware version of family-friendly inclusion. A world where SOGIE¹ (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression) individuals are not beholden to ghettoized lifestyles. Mayor Pete Buttigieg married his mister right at the pulpit. He joined the military while not asking or telling. He ran for mayor, winning twice. Now he is contending for the presidency. He also happens to be legally inferior, at least in the eyes of certain state laws. Pathways to nomination are narrow, and Buttigieg’s sexual orientation exposes an electoral fault-line by raising questions over how the “correct” White House occupant is supposed to look. Buttigieg is forced to adroitly modulate his tone by introducing polyphonic discourses in moderation of his stance. His capitulations mirror those of previous candidates representing otherness, including Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. But at what price?

When discussing Buttigieg, dispassionate yet considered opinions focus on wholesomeness. Brussel sprouts are described with similar indifference. Almost everyone acknowledges his viability, coupled with the significance of being the first, openly gay, presidential candidate in US history. Liberal bonhomie divides, however, over whether he is the “right kind of gay” and too centrist. Additionally, the mayor’s church life is eye-rolled dismissively, while his military career is viewed as

¹ SOGIE is an abbreviation combining sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression as a broader reference term, while including the LGBT community. The term is used in legal doctrines, within UN vernacular, and on social media.

counter-progressive. Conservatives feel that America may not be ready for a gay first family and reflexively point at his limited experience. Buttigieg's ascendancy, however, is remarkable considering it has been less than fifty years since the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a disorder, while marriage equality was gavelled into US law a mere four years ago (Sullivan). Although a gay candidacy may appear of relevance to only pockets of invested groups, it should stir pride in every American who cares about liberty, life, and the pursuit of staying that way. During 2017, hate crimes against SOGIE Americans increased by 17%, while 54% are concerned about sexual orientation-based victimization (GLAAD). The Trump Accountability Project has counted over one hundred prejudiced attacks against the SOGIE community by the current Administration since taking office (Trump). Faced with institutionalized discrimination, increasing violence, decreasing levels of acceptance, and predictably inhospitable legislative environments, Buttigieg represents an appropriate brand of bravery. Is he calibrated and modulated to succeed? Undoubtedly. And anyone who snubs that is simply not paying attention.

Any cover story is part-documentary and part-propaganda with the May 13, 2019, cover of *Time* featuring the man with his eye on 1600 and his spouse in front of their Indiana home, ushering reality into history while avoiding dishonesty or fabrication. Beyond implied narrative and constructed characters, the image dispenses with superfluous peripherals letting the couple assume historic meaning while deftly deploying myth-making markers. There is a pragmatism to the full-frontal pose suggesting relatability customarily reserved for first-name friends or family and orthodontically corrected newsreaders. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks points out that “[Pete] is also an older person's idea of what a young person should be” (Brooks). Yielding to that electoral segment, Pete places a socially sanitized arm around Chasten, barely provocative enough to cause schoolmarmish hyperventilations at the Piggly Wiggly. Posing in front of their net-curtained Colonial Revival home, beyond the metaphorically solid foundation, the couple radiates urbane aspiration.

Drawing on his considerable legal skills, Buttigieg applies a foundational jury-swaying move: he neuters public opinion through controlled exposure to visual cues, primarily as inoculation against Levitical knee jerks. In other words, Buttigieg references his marriage and values, illustrating a modulation to centrism, which is interpreted in a matter-of-fact tone on the *Time* cover.

On campaign materials, Buttigieg appears dissonant vis-à-vis the liberal gay electorate. Here, *Time* captures the candidate in Log Cabin Republican mode, complete with sculpted hair and a button-down shirt. On other occasions, he is flanked by a flag or seated at a cocobolo desk, as he singlehandedly claws back visual patriotic vestiges cannibalized by conservatism. “Democrats make an error by not manipulating the flag and symbols of patriotism,” says author and Vanderbilt University Professor Janet Eyster, “so we get the fascist-thing embraced by the working class it undermines. Part of it is knee-jerk symbolism, thinking they are patriotic” (Eyster). Our conversation recalls journalist Molly Ivins’ prophetic, “I prefer someone who burns the flag and then wraps themselves up in the Constitution over someone who burns the Constitution and then wraps themselves up in the flag” (Lange). Mayor Pete may not be burning the words of the Founding Fathers, but he fastidiously links himself to conservative accoutrements in tuning his image.

Embedded in Pete and Chasten’s *Time* cover, symbols combine to create a coded narrative of savvy politicians who happen to be married: a visual, “nothing to see here folks!” Inferred politesse amplifies the “First Family” double entendre as messaging signal. Typography alludes to the firstness aspect of the candidacy, a possible presidency, and the definition of a presidential first family. Similarly, a sartorial blandness indicates a measured upward trajectory while deftly sidestepping any compromising subcultural allegiances. The couple presents themselves as significantly more prep than PReP, their restrained dress codes chosen to resonate with an electorate, less accepting of alternative lifestyles. In the same way, the mise-en-scène builds on narratives of non-confrontational, donuts-after-worship morality using elements of dress, staging, and composition within the frame.

Buttigieg knows the perils faced by a Democrat in the spotlight, having observed full-blown Fox News vitriol when Obama discombobulated world order with a tan suit (Hilton). Blurring details through a stylistic tilt-shift, he appears de rigueur in a crisp shirt and standard-issue trousers, while Chasten adopts a domestic tone in purple gingham, a pattern associated with Scandi-Gustavian design and 1950s kitchens. While sharing the cover page, Pete subtly overshadows Chasten, establishing hierarchy and placing the taller Pete in dominance. His ring finger is prominent, with the light catching the marital-code gold. Yellow daffodils are in boisterous bloom, and the interplay between color, pattern, and relatable enthusiasm evokes a halcyon Stepford.

Elitist coastal eyes ignore that *Obergefell v Hodges* was a bittersweet *pourboire* considering that in more than half of US states, despite being able to get married, gayness may get someone fired from their workplace, or evicted from their dwelling (Gessen). Framed against this possibility of government-sanctioned second-class citizenship, minimizing the symbolism of Buttigieg's campaign or vacuously judging his wardrobe as an electability benchmark, is ignoring the elephant in the courtroom. On October 9, 2019, the US Supreme Court heard three oral arguments that may decide whether the SOGIE community is protected under federal nondiscrimination law. Indisputably, some fervently anticipate an antagonistic ruling, including Pete's home state, Indiana (Caspani).

If Trump, upon election, was cynically viewed as the candidate America deserved, Buttigieg is the candidate we envy in other countries but lack the boldness to elect ourselves. He would always have to dig deeper, and even then, Buttigieg may still not crack the nod, nor be considered equal in the eyes of the twenty-six states that seem to emulate Margaret Atwood's Gilead more than the place envisioned by our Founding Fathers. As a consequence, it appears that the price a gay candidate has to pay for the privilege of representing the "other" in a presidential race, is the burden of dynamic adjustments in anticipation of prejudice and weaponized bigotry. A lot like being gay in Indiana.

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