

**The State of Unions:
Activism (and In-Activism) in Decision 2004**

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Abstract

This poem processes the 2004 presidential election in the context of my research community, an extended family of gay men: marginalized by sexual orientation but privileged by sex, gender identity, race, class, and education. While reflexively attending my own dominant identities, I explore the possibilities for queer activism and forces that seem to undermine it, particularly for White, economically-privileged gay men.

key words: gay men, politics, activism

Warning:

though I am
 a post-modernist,
 an anti-essentialist,
 and an aspiring queer theorist,
 I will be making capital-T
 Truth statements
 in this political
 poetic
 polemic.

I invite you to offer your own truths
 in response.

I spent the autumn of 2004 as many of us did:
 walking,
 knocking,
 and what bordered on
 stalking,
 all to prevent the result we now have:
 Four More Years.

Four More Years:
 the refrain
 lodges
 in my throat.
 I swallow
 and begin to speak,
 my words
 flowing
 from despair,
 fear,
 and hope.

I address
 this address
 to men
 like those in my research community.

Men with whom I have been collaborating
for ten years
on a project exploring
the communicative and relational
opportunities and challenges
of friendship across sexual orientation.¹

Men who have shared
their stories,
struggles,
and families
with me.

Men who identify (privately)
as gay (not queer).

Men who also tend to be
White,
healthy (at least for now),
middle-, upper-middle, or upper-class,
educated (not academic),
professional (not overly political).

Men who can
and do
pass.

That audience,
the “you” in the commentary to come,
is probably not the “you” reading this page.

But I suspect I am not alone
in counting such men
among my closest friends,
my family.

¹ See Tillmann-Healy (2001, 2003, 2004).

My friends,
 every day,
I question the ethics
 of my participation
in an exclusionary
 “program of privilege”²:
 heterosexual marriage.

I remind myself
 that I never can understand fully
the constraints under which you
 live,
 love,
 move,
and work.

But as a young woman
 who teaches gender and queer studies,
I do know a thing
 or two
about constraints.

I have slogged my way through
 the year-long academic hazing we call
Tenure.

The senior members of my department:
all White,
 middle-aged,
 heterosexual,
 upper-middle and upper-class
 men.

² See Warner (1999).

The Faculty Evaluation Committee:
 six White,
 middle-aged,
 heterosexual,
 upper-middle and upper-class
 men.

Deans,
 President,
 Chairman of the Board
 --need I go on?

So yes,
 I know a thing or two
 about constraints,
 about repression,
 about rage,
 about the performance of
 good
 little
 self
 in everyday life.

Here is my question:
 my friends,
 where
 were
 you
 in this election cycle?

The stakes were so high:
 the remaking of the Supreme Court
 in the images of Scalia and Thomas,
 the overturn of Lawrence v. Texas
 and Roe v. Wade.

Remember that night at Margaret Cho?
 We howled,
 fists raised,
 when she railed against homophobia in schools.

But when she questioned why old men
still control the reproductive freedom of women,
I applauded,
 nearly alone,
 in that “*family*”-filled auditorium.

Later, in the car,
I asked what you made of this non-response.

You didn't respond.

I asked again.

Silence.

Ache.

More silence.

Let me tell you a story.
 A young mother dies,
as thousands did,
 after a back-alley abortion.

Social services
 RI PS
an orphaned boy from his home,
 placing him where he will be
shamed
 and struck
throughout his childhood.

The boy grows up
 and inflicts this violence
onto his son.

A friend of yours
 inherited this legacy.
 His father
 is the boy
 whose mother bled to death.

Such was
 “life”
 in America
 before Roe v. Wade.

Did you see that piece in the *New York Times*
 featuring gay male Republicans
 for life?
 Not “for life” as in
 forever gay
 or forever Republican,
 as in
 Anti-Abortion
 Gay
 Male
 Republicans.

When I get my head around this,
 I will report back.

My friends,
 can you not see
 that your fate as a gay man
 is intertwined
 with mine,
 with all women’s?

Kate Bornstein writes in *Gender Outlaw*:
 “Homophobia and misogyny are not related.
 THEY ARE THE SAME!”
 I don’t know about “the same,”
 but surely two sides of a
 reversible
 coat.

It could be said that,
 of all members of your—our—community,
 you have the most to lose
 by making yourself vulnerable.
 Passing brings privilege,
 however temporary
 and unstable.

I also see,
 hear,
 feel
 —but never understand fully—
 the economic,
 social,
 and even bodily
 consequences you might bear
 should things go terribly,
 even violently,
 awry,
 as they so often have for those
 “too public.”

On the other hand, my friends,
 compared to your
 non-White,
 working-class,
 lesbian,
 and transgendered
 brothers and sisters,
you stand on firmer ground.

In this election cycle,
 so many others *did* make themselves vulnerable,
 canvassing for Kerry,
 MoveOn,
 or most visibly,
 the Human Rights Campaign.
 Why not you?

I realize that it's heresy
for someone with heterosexual
and marital
PRIVILEGE
to excoriate you for what are,
at least in part,
responses
to homophobia and heterosexism.

But I am afraid of your—our—complacency.

We share many enemies,
and they are organized,
on-message,
well-financed.
Emboldened by “mandate,”
they earned “capital in the campaign
--political capital”
and they “intend
to spend it.”

If the homophobia amendment
was not that final moment of clarity,
what will it take?

You tell me you're not a single-issue voter.
But this amendment,
these 11 ballot initiatives,
strip your humanity
and undermine your most significant relationship.
One *hell* of a single issue.

What will it take to get
a little more of your—our—discretionary income
into the non-profit sector?

A little more of your—our—time,
energy,
spirit
into grassroots efforts?

What will it take?

I am afraid
of the answer.

You and I knew that Kerry wasn't Kucinich or even Dean
(not that you voted for Kucinich or even Dean).
You did vote in the primary,
right?

You and I had read the Kerry-Edwards (re)position paper.
Against the homophobia amendment
AND same-sex marriage.
For civil unions
AND state determination.

Those saucy Republicans:
always cooking up charges of inconsistency!

And who could forget the 2004 "debates"?
Kerry's remark

(was it off the cuff;
was it calculated?):

"If you were to talk to Dick Cheney's daughter,
who is a lesbian..."

Or Edward's condescension-qua-compassion for the Cheneys,
his "respect" for their willingness to "embrace"
their less-than-proud Mary,
as if she had contracted leprosy
while spreading abstinence-only education in the Sub-Sahara.

But

don't get me started
on Daughter Halliburton either.
I'm more ambivalent about outing
than about
selling out.

Marginalized status does not automatically confer
raised consciousness.

But neither is it
a free pass
for undermining others' human rights.

So yeah, Kerry was not the second coming.

But how can you simply throw up your hands
and not vote?

And *you*.

You came to my "Take Back Our Country" barbecue
on September the 11th.

You ate pulled pork,
drank beer,
wrote a check for MoveOn.

Now I hear you were part
of the 23% of gay men and lesbians who voted for Bush,
whom you believed would be "better for business."
Who's business?

And *you*,

Mr. Representation without Taxation?
What do you think financed your public education,
including your state-subsidized business degree?

And you two.

Did you have to buy
your new and your certified pre-owned BMWs
from the only dealer in town whose towering billboard read:
"We Support the Troops
and President Bush"?

Yes, I did see the Kerry-Edwards sign in your yard.

And to all those

with neither the time nor the energy
to canvass and phone bank,
Let's Cut the Crap!

Don't think I don't know where you were
on Friday and Saturday nights.

My sources go clubbing too.

You're right.

I haven't told the whole truth.

Four long years ago,

I saw Al Gore as
the hollow man,
the stuffed man.

It sickens me to report
that my only contribution in 2000 was
my vote.

I felt indignant

when dubious voter rolls,
voter intimidation,
and the Supreme Court
delivered the White House.

Indignant,
but not enraged,
not militant.

That would come later:

the quid pro quo tax cuts,
the fox-guarding-henhouse environmental policies,
the five million more without health insurance,
the homophobia amendment,
the war,

The War,

THE WAR.

Florida,

our state, my friends,
was "lost"
by 537 votes.

537.

One person,

one team,

could have mobilized that many.

Why not me?

Why not *us*?

Yes,

I admit,
this report has not been “fair and balanced.”

I know that after voting
for Reagan, Reagan,
Bush, Bush,
Dole,
and Bush,
you sucked in your breath
and cast this one
for Kerry.

And you folks:

where do I begin?
Fundraisers,
action alerts,
get-out-the-vote drives.

To hit the streets and work the phones,
you sacrificed extra shifts
and overtime pay.

You talked politics with your customers,
perhaps at some cost to your small business.

To facilitate your activism,
your partners arose even earlier,
worked even harder,
stayed even later.

So, my friends,
 wherever
you were
 in this election cycle,
here is my question:
 where
 do we go
 from here?

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