

**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.



My friends,  
    every day,  
I question the ethics  
    of my participation  
in an exclusionary  
    “program of privilege”<sup>2</sup>:  
    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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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 11<sup>th</sup>.

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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