

The other side of Lawrence

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BEST OF INTERACT 2003

A Supreme Court victory may turn out to be the gay community's death knell.

I don't remember where I was when the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision was handed down in 1986. I had not come out yet, but I do recall seeing protests on the news from my family's living room in Wilmington, North Carolina. It would take me a few years to realize the significance of the decision on every aspect of gay life. By upholding a Georgia statute that outlawed consensual sodomy, the Supreme Court denied gays and lesbians any constitutional right to privacy in even the most intimate matters. Put into historical context--in the midst of the Reagan era and the full force of anti-AIDS homophobia--the opinion was hardly surprising.

On the morning of June 26, I woke to the sound of my radio alarm and the voice of an NPR news announcer, who said that *Bowers v. Hardwick* was no longer the law of the land. The Supreme Court had reversed itself in a sweeping decision, *Lawrence v. Texas*, that stunned court watchers across the country.

The Court could have taken the easy way out. In her concurring opinion, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor called for striking down the offending law--a Texas anti-sodomy statute--because it violated the equal protection rights of homosexuals (as acknowledged in the *Evans* decision back in 1995). But Justice Anthony Kennedy's majority opinion went much farther, reviving the court's dying concern for personal privacy and handing queers a monumental legal and political victory.

I applaud the Court for having the courage to correct its own mistake. The *Lawrence* decision is worthy of celebration, especially by those who have fought for the last seventeen years to overturn *Bowers*. Yet what disquiets me is the lack of debate about what the decision means for the queer community, culturally speaking. To read most of the queer press, you would get the impression that the *Lawrence* decision will have no negative consequences at all and it is up, up, up from here.

One thing is for certain: The *Lawrence* decision firmly establishes our place in the firmament of protected classes and sets the stage for the scuttling of laws against gay adoption, military service, and perhaps even marriage. We can leave behind our sequins and sexual liberation, and say begone to our urban, childless existence. Soon we can be as clueless about art and activism as Joe Sixpack and Sally Housecoat.

The danger of backsliding is real. *Lawrence* may mean the acceleration of what has become the gay community's steady, incontrovertible course since the 1980s: assimilation. That assimilation is the primary goal of gay liberation is, for the most part, unquestioned. Those who agitate against it--like the group Gay Shame in San Francisco--are painted as fringe wackos who only want to spoil our gay old time.

In the 1980s, AIDS and a conservative political climate created a schism in the queer community between the more radical approach of AIDS activists and the more sedate political activities of gay groups trying desperately to advance gay rights legislation in spite of AIDS. Queer Nation attempted to take the radical tactics of AIDS activists and use them to advance the visibility of queers and queer issues. But the nineties saw the decline of AIDS activism and Queer Nation and the rise of more mainstream and conservative gay groups, such as Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and the Log Cabin Republicans, and the ascent of assimilation-related issues--for instance, military service and marriage--to the top of the gay political agenda.

Once Bill Clinton mentioned us in a political speech during his first run for president, the process of "de-revolution" was complete: The gay community had become a player in mainstream politics. Gay conservative writer Bruce Bawer got his place at the table and gays were just happy with any political crumbs that were tossed their way.

With assimilation as our goal, we became a victim of our own success. Each victory created a more comfortable, accepting atmosphere for all to come out, finally resulting in a mass exodus by the last group to leave the closet: political conservatives. By moving the community to the right, we experienced a further loss of activist fervor and less support for issues like environmentalism, feminism, racial equality, and labor. While coming out is still a revolutionary act, for many it is the only one they will ever commit.

An examination of exit poll data over the last decade further illustrates our political drift to the right. According to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, a quarter of queer voters supported Republican congressional candidates in 1992; in 1998, that support had risen to one-third. The Log Cabin Republicans celebrated the fact that 25 percent of gay voters cast a ballot for George W. Bush in 2000, the highest percentage for a GOP presidential candidate ever. And the actual conservative numbers are probably much higher considering that most gay conservatives are less likely to feel comfortable admitting their homosexuality to exit pollsters.

Some would argue that the decrease in political fervor is only natural, now that we have gotten much of what we wanted, and there are few fights left to fight. But even if you think environmental, feminist, class, and racial issues are outside the purview of queer politics, internationally the queer rights movement is just beginning. After all, gays and lesbians in many countries are still subject to the death penalty for merely existing.

But if the queer community in the United States does recognize that a world exists outside our borders, you can't tell it by our actions. Except for the admirable work of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), which gets no attention in the mainstream gay press, little is being done to change the situation abroad.

Our community's growing desire to assimilate affects not just our politics, but also our culture. Even as we gays and lesbians have influenced the culture of the larger society, mainstream American culture has had a diluting effect on us. Gay culture has been replaced with gay consumer culture.

Now that being gay will not lead to mainstream rejection per se, gay and lesbian artists can now be openly gay and pander to the mainstream--but at what price? In our consumer-oriented society, we abandon the queer aesthetic to increase sales. The music of Sylvester, Bronski Beat, and the in-your-face homosexuality of Pansy Division has given way to George Michael, Melissa Etheridge, and the almost apologetic homosexuality of Elton John. AIDS was once an important political issue for queer artists--embodied in the work of Keith Haring, Marlon Riggs, Tony Kushner, and Larry Kramer--but nowadays that and other kinds of politically infused queer art are on the decline. AIDS reinforced the role of gay men as cultural outsiders and was celebrated by gay men (and lesbians) in theater, visual arts, performance art, and literature. Imagine Keith Haring's provocative work being used to sell Volkswagens back in 1985. Imagine Keith Haring allowing it.

Today, politically charged art is the exception in the gay community rather than the rule. For every Laramie Project (a play about the murder of Matthew Shepard), you have ten plays where the story seems merely an excuse for male nudity. Nudity as a means of making a socio-political statement about gender has been replaced with naked boys for the sake of naked boys, a neoconservative celebration of sexual attraction within the context of good-old-fashioned, atavistic objectification: sex not as political statement but as consumer activity.

Surveying the current queer political and artistic landscape is most disheartening because it is unlikely to change for the better. The last few decades have seen a growing anti-intellectualism in this country, resulting in an American society that does not like to be challenged or think critically, especially about itself. And this is one pernicious characteristic that the queer community has adopted. I have friends who refuse to question any decisions made by local queer leaders. This "we-must-support-the-troops" mentality is no prettier to gaze upon among gays than it is in the larger society. If objective, critical thinking is a crucial aspect of good art, then it is no small wonder that American culture, and by extension queer culture, is experiencing an artistic famine.

Perhaps queer culture is merely a transient state of being--a roadstop on the way from historically denied existence to complete mainstream cultural absorption. But there is no reason that members of an oppressed group cannot work to eradicate barriers to their full participation in the larger society while refusing to surrender their cultural identity. There is no reason that we in the gay community should exchange our hard-won political awareness for something we should have had all along: freedom.

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ORGANIZATIONS >

International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission
An organization that lobbies around the world on behalf of gay rights.
URL: <http://www.iglhrc.org>

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
Washington-based organization working for the civil rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people.
URL: <http://www.nglftf.org>

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