

A Response to Toby Rowe

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In 2004, San Francisco, in the wake of California's legalization of gay marriage, represented the achievement of a goal for the GLBT community. Homosexual couples flocked to the city to be married, causing a flurry of lawsuits, even involving the supreme court of California. Four years later, the people of California reversed this step by voting in the 2008 election to enact Proposition 8, banning gay marriage throughout the state. The ideological mindset within California seemed, to a nation intently following the gay marriage debate, to have made a complete political reversal.

Toby Rowe writes in the article "'Whether You Like It or Not': California's Proposition 8 and the Rhetoric of Monitory Democracy" that this ideological shift occurred as a result of the Yes on 8 campaign's usage of monitory democracy rhetoric.¹ Rowe cites a particular Yes on 8 ad as an example: the TV ad frames the populace as being bullied by gay activists. The confrontational and aggressive portrayal of the opposition begs for a defensive response from Californians. The ad corresponds with the plausible overarching theory Rowe sets up from which to view the ideological change. However, in order to fully understand how Yes on 8 employed monitory democracy effectively, one must understand the attacked values. Yes on 8 had to define what the legalization of gay marriage was violating. While Rowe sets up the theory, he skims over the particulars of how Yes on 8 caused a reactionary response.

The rhetorical strategy shaped the desire of the voting population by stirring a defensive protest. "The appeal to a populist-democratic ethos that lies at the heart of monitory democratic rhetoric may be suspect, however, insofar as political rhetoric in general may be understood as working to shape and re-create—rather than to simply represent—the desires of the populace," writes Rowe (70). Rowe further comments on the Web site name, stating that *ProtectMarriage.com* "perfectly encapsulated this rhetorical maneuver, positioning proponents of the amendment as protectors of traditional marriage against the impending threat of government interference" (69). Yes on 8 successfully defined and illustrated a conflict (real or imaginary) that caused Californians to pass an extremely conservative piece of legislation. The ad, together with the Web site, portrayed those supporting Yes on 8 as protectors and defenders of "traditional marriage." By framing those against Proposition 8 as perpetrating an aggressive attack on Californians, as Rowe states, the Yes on 8 campaigners were able to stir a defensive and emotional response in their favor—this fulfills the definition of monitory democracy. How did Yes on 8 define the traditional values of marriage in such a way that those values were seen to be worthy of defense? How were definitions merged to present the concept of marriage as threatened, especially when the right to marriage was being *extended* to include more couples?

In order to stir voters to action, Yes on 8 had to prove that allowing a segment of the population a new set of rights would directly infringe on another group's set of rights. Yes on 8 created a

battlefield by framing marriage in religious terms instead of legal ones. The homosexual community was demanding a legal status under the title “marriage”;² this added an additional group to the list of those eligible for a legal contract in a seemingly liberal state. Yes on 8 took this legal contract, marriage, and focused on the institution’s religious associations in order to stir defensive and impassioned emotions. The emotional response gave Proposition 8 the momentum to pass amid a reaction associated with monitory democracy theory.

How Yes on 8 framed the word marriage is illustrated on the *ProtectMarriage.com* blog, which details Yes on 8 events and ideals.³ Nancy Limon, the grassroots director of Yes on 8, describes the group’s mission as “restoring the traditional definition of marriage” and “protecting the sanctity of marriage” (23 September 2008). Limon’s diction squares with Rowe’s point that the campaign used the rhetoric of protest. The idea of the traditional definition of marriage was connected to religious values by linking the concept with the word “sanctity”—a buzzword among the religious Right.⁴

When the word “marriage” is used outside of such phrases or with a signifier adjective like “gay,” a phrase expounding on the traditional definition follows, thereby separating the earlier all-encompassing definition into two now-distinct entities. The separation stigmatizes the opposition as the “Other.” The adjectives in front of the word marriage are critical. Phrases used include “the sacred tradition of marriage” and “the traditions of marriage” (15 October 2008). The post “News Media at a Loss for Words” praises communities for standing up for *traditional* marriage. “They [pastors in the African American community] are proud to stand with religious people from all corners of the state to protect marriage.” The word marriage remains standing under the protection of a “traditional” or religious connection. In this case, the people who are defending marriage are “religious people.” By framing marriage within a religious context, Yes on 8 creates a rhetorical statement—gay marriage now encroaches on one’s personal religious beliefs. Sonja Eddings Brown, the deputy communications director, furthers the religious language by writing, “[Y]ou will be seeing many of [the pastors] soon, making public their deeply-held convictions.” To the Yes on 8 campaign, marriage is linked to religious conviction—it is not only a political issue. The framing of the word continues throughout the blog; it is rarely left without a framer.

The majority of the instances when the word “marriage” is used without a qualifying adjective or phrase appears in “Statement on Proposition 8 Passing by Ron Prentice,”⁵ written after California passed the proposition. Prentice declares, “This is a great day for marriage,” going on to explain how Californians defended the traditional view of marriage to achieve the new legal definition: “Marriage is between a man and a woman.” The opening statement is free from qualifications: it stands alone as the general word marriage. Marriage is now aligned with and defined as the religious concept of it. Prentice ends with the new legal definition of marriage. The sentence is very straightforward: this word means this. The subtle shift signifies the shift in meaning: no longer must the word marriage be defined each time for Yes on 8—religious connotations have been built into the word and into the law.

The careful definitions used by Yes on 8 built the campaign’s identity in the context of monitory democracy. The group harnessed religious sentiments in its successful bid to become a watchdog organization. The careful use of the word marriage confirms Rowe’s overall theory about how California’s ideological change came about—Yes on 8 shaped the opposition in such a way that there was a reactionary response. The employment of rhetorical framing provides an explanation of how this reactionary response was accessed through religious connections.

Notes

¹ Rowe explains monitory democracy by citing communication theorist Roger Hurwitz and political scientist John Keane. This type of rhetorical interaction between the public and the government has arisen as a watchdog relationship. Through the use of technology, groups of citizens may monitor the government and voice their concerns and protests.

² This is in no way to discount the social implications that could have resulted from achieving the status of legal marriage.

³ The blog began on 12 September 2008 and ran through 5 November 2008. It also picked up sporadically in 2009 and 2010. The writers include the organization's director, campaign manager, deputy communications director, and other members of the campaign office.

⁴ See the pro-life catchphrase "the sanctity of life," for example.

⁵ This is the official statement from Ron Prentice, chairman of *ProtectMarriage.com*—Yes on 8.

Works Cited

Limon, Nancy, et al. Weblog post. *ProtectMarriage.com Blog*. ProtectMarriage.com Action Fund, n.d. Web. 30 June 2010.

Rowe, Toby. "'Whether You Like It or Not': California's Proposition 8 and the Rhetoric of Monitory Democracy." *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric* 7 (2010): 63–73. Print.