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BOOK REVIEW

Epistemology of the Closet

by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick*

Reviewed by Mark Reschke**

In the 1980s, homophobic attacks from many fronts became almost commonplace. In that same decade, the gay and lesbian rights movement redoubled its efforts and academic explorations of "minority" sexualities burgeoned. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* appears in the early 1990s like a "missing link" in the evolution of gay and lesbian studies and politics.¹ Sedgwick's contribution hovers in the filmy intellectual plane of theory, but it is the kind of theory that transforms, providing shape to the past and possibilities for the future.

The transformative power behind Sedgwick's theory manifests itself in four important ways: it calls attention to a crisis at the foundation of current lesbian and gay political strategies; it directs the discourse of gay studies through and beyond the essentialist-social constructionist debate which has dominated the field in recent years; it establishes that the homosexual-heterosexual definitional divide is a central controlling factor in all modern Western identities and social organizations, not merely in homosexual identities and organizations; and it opens a space for those nongays who have sufficient knowledge and awareness of their own privilege and homophobia to investigate gay and lesbian issues, or, to put it in Sedgwick's terms, to engage in "antihomophobic" projects.

Sedgwick broke new ground in these areas before with *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*.² In that earlier work, she demonstrated that the central concern of English literature has been the maintenance of male homosocial

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1. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).

2. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985).

bonds through the control of women. Specifically, in triangular erotic rivalries, the bond linking the two rivals is as intense as the bond linking either rival to the object of desire.³ For two men, the presence of a woman "between" them provides a socially acceptable veneer to the intensity of their bond. Thus, the men must maintain a "traffic in women,"⁴ keeping women isolated from each other and powerless. When these male homosocial bonds become overtly erotic, and a man accepts the woman's "position," the implied fluidity of gender roles threatens the very male-female distinction on which patriarchy is based. Sedgwick concluded that literature functions to perpetuate the male-female-male triangle and to eliminate the disruptive potential of male homosexuality.⁵

Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, nominally a work of "literary theory" but actually a cross-disciplinary intellectual tour-de-force, continues this project and broadens its critical scope. The historical period which Sedgwick covers in this new work begins before the turn of the century with the emergence of homosexuality as a codified identity. Never before had fixed sexual identities been assigned to individuals in a way comparable to assigning gender identities at birth.⁶ Sedgwick is especially incisive when discussing the apparently arbitrary construction of modern sexual categories:

It is a rather amazing fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, etc. etc. etc.), precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged . . . , and has remained, as *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of "sexual orientation."⁷

As Sedgwick makes clear, it is only through the creation of the category "homosexual" that the "heterosexual" appeared. Through a century long process of medical, legal and psychiatric discourses, these categories came to have diametrically opposed meanings. Sedgwick's agenda is to expose the dependence of a privileged heterosexual position upon the existence of a subordinated homosexual.

Implicit in this analysis is a radical challenge to the founda-

3. *Id.* at 21.

4. *Id.* at 25.

5. See generally *id.*

6. Sedgwick, *supra* note 1, at 2.

7. *Id.* at 8.

tion of much of contemporary lesbian and gay politics. The common strategy has been to adopt a "minority" position which assumes that same-sex sexual activity is unique to a small number of individuals who share common goals or interests, rather than seeing same-sex contact as one behavior in a range of erotic choices available to all human beings and not innately fixed to other aspects of personality or psychology by anything but social construction. While acknowledging that most of the civil rights gains made for lesbians and gays in the past twenty years have been achieved through maintaining a "minority" position, Sedgwick suggests that this strategy creates a double-bind. She insists that any useful antihomophobic project must continually question the definiteness of sexual categories. She writes: "[T]he book aims to resist in every way it can the deadening pretended knowingness by which the chisel of modern homo/hetero definitional crisis tends, in public discourse, to be hammered most fatally home."⁸ Sedgwick does not suggest discarding sexual categories and all minority political strategies for lesbians and gays. But she demands that we "[r]epeatedly . . . ask how certain categorizations work, what enactments they are performing and what relations they are creating, rather than what they essentially mean."⁹

Sedgwick provides a striking example of how categories manifest themselves with devastating results in modern legal practice. "Homosexual panic" is a popular defense strategy for men accused of gay-bashing. The implication in this strategy is that the defendant's responsibility for the violence is "diminished by a pathological psychological condition, perhaps brought on by an unwanted sexual advance from the man whom he attacked."¹⁰ Not only does this argument rest on the assumptions that all gay men make random advances to strangers and, even more disturbing, that such advances warrant violence sometimes to the point of homicide, but it also assumes that "hatred of homosexuals . . . is so atypical . . . as to be classifiable as an accountability-reducing illness."¹¹ The "homosexual panic" defense, Sedgwick suggests, is viable only because of the double bind of a "minority" gay identity. Sexual orientation is popularly perceived as constituting a fixed identity, when, in fact, such an identity cannot ever be solidly determined in the way minority identities centered on race, ethnicity, or gender can be. For example, we do not often speak of those who are certain they

8. *Id.* at 12.

9. *Id.* at 27.

10. *Id.* at 19.

11. *Id.*

are people of color and others who are uncertain if they are people of color and, more to the point, a man charged with violence against people of color never uses uncertainty about his own racial identity to defend against those charges.¹² The gay-basher's defense effectively argues from the position that homophobia is an adequate justification for homophobic attacks: a given person who is forced to face uncertainty about his own sexual identity, by confrontation with a second person who is perceived as being certain about his sexual identity, cannot be expected to control his violent reaction toward the second person.

Through this analysis, Sedgwick addresses the theoretical debate which has occupied so much time and energy in gay academic circles: the relative value of "essentialist" versus "social constructionist" studies of homosexuality. The essentialist position maintains that identities based in part on same-sex object choice have existed in all periods and communities throughout history and is analogous to the "minority" position discussed above. Social constructionists argue that it is impossible or futile to compare individuals who experienced same-sex desire before the labeling and hardening of a homosexual category of identifying with individuals living after that category achieved solidity. Sedgwick's acknowledged sympathies are with social constructionists, but she credits essentialist studies for providing the groundwork for her study.¹³ She directs scholars' energies away from the limits of this debate by focusing on how, not whether, categories have meaning, thus creating a space for legitimate antihomophobic endeavors from a variety of perspectives. The imperative, Sedgwick reminds us, is "antihomophobic inquiry" which necessitates "the production, by other antihomophobic readers who may be differently situated, of the widest possible range of other and even contradictory availabilities."¹⁴

Sedgwick, taking it as evident that sexual identities are inherently intertwined and unstable, draws several crucial parallels to this paradigm which she outlines in her introduction. She asserts a connection between the homo-hetero definition and other universal modern definitions: private and public, secrecy and disclosure, knowledge and ignorance, masculine and feminine, to name only a few of the over twenty binary definitions she discusses. For example, she elaborates on the conflation of knowledge and ignorance and suggests that ignorance sets the terms for knowledge,

12. *Id.* at 13.

13. *Id.* at 14.

14. *Id.* at 4.

just as homosexuality sets the terms of its opposite. With characteristic dry humor, she writes: "If M. Mitterand knows English but Mr. Reagan lacks—as he did—French, it is the urbane M. Mitterand who must negotiate in an acquired tongue, the ignorant Mr. Reagan who may dilate in his native one."¹⁵

Another way definitional binarisms like knowledge and ignorance parallel the homo-hetero divide is demonstrated in Chapter One's discussion of the impossible double-bind of "the closet." Sedgwick again relies on legal discourses on homosexuality for her analysis. She details the case of Acanfora, an eighth-grade science teacher fired from his job in Maryland. He lost his first appeal in court, not because he was gay, but on the grounds that he chose to go public about it by appearing on "60 Minutes" and on PBS. The Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals effectively upheld this decision, not because Acanfora chose to go public, but because he did not tell his employers that he was gay before they hired him. Sedgwick writes: "[T]he space for simply existing as a gay person who is a teacher is in fact bayoneted through, from both sides, by the vectors of a disclosure at once compulsory and forbidden."¹⁶

This irony is underscored by another illustration of the incoherent conflation of sex with the public and the private in legal parlance:

When it refused in 1985 to consider an appeal in *Rowland v. Mad River Local School District*, the U.S. Supreme Court let stand the firing of a bisexual guidance counselor . . . , the act of coming out was judged to be not highly protected under the First Amendment because it does not constitute speech on a matter "of public concern." It was . . . only eighteen months later that the same U.S. Supreme Court ruled, in response to Michael Hardwick's contention that it's nobody's business if he do, that it ain't; if homosexuality is not, however densely adjudicated, to be considered a matter of *public* concern, neither in the Supreme Court's binding opinion does it subsist under the mantle of the *private*.¹⁷

In the latter chapters of her book, Sedgwick supports her theory with abundant and richly suggestive examples. Following the influential cultural critiques of Michel Foucault,¹⁸ Sedgwick argues, through the analysis of canonical literary texts ranging from Melville to James to Proust, that, since the 18th century, "'knowledge' and 'sex' became conceptually inseparable from one an-

15. *Id.* at 70-71.

16. *Id.* at 70.

17. *Id.*

18. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* (Trans. Robert Hurley 1978).

other—so that knowledge means in the first place sexual knowledge; ignorance, sexual ignorance.”¹⁹ The construction of the homosexual serves to solidify this discursive process:

I want to argue that a lot of the energy of attention and demarcation that has swirled around issues of homosexuality since the end of the nineteenth century, . . . has been impelled by the distinctly indicative relation of homosexuality to wider mappings of secrecy and disclosure, and of the private and the public, that were and are critically problematic for the gender, sexual, and economic structures of the heterosexist culture at large, mappings whose enabling but dangerous incoherence has become oppressively, durably condensed in certain figures of homosexuality.²⁰

Herein lies Sedgwick’s greatest contribution. Understanding the “epistemology of the closet,” the homo-hetero divide, is imperative to everyone, not only to homosexuals. She writes: “So permeative has the suffusing stain of homo/heterosexual crisis been that to discuss any of these indices [knowledge/ignorance, masculine/feminine, majority/minority, public/private, et.al.] in any context, in the absence of an antihomophobic analysis, must perhaps be to perpetuate unknowingly compulsions implicit in each.”²¹

As a heterosexual, Sedgwick demonstrates conclusively that the perspective of lesbians and gay men is not the only lens through which it is legitimate and useful to attack homophobia and study sexualities. Her work also establishes the standards for thoroughness and commitment which nongay persons who undertake antihomophobic projects will be expected to match. The historical inadequacy of sexual categories, which Sedgwick establishes so persuasively, could easily be used as an excuse for dismissing or deferring discussions of sexual difference, discrimination, and the unexamined biases of well-intended nongays. Instead, Sedgwick demonstrates a profound sensitivity toward and intelligence about the realities of living in the subordinated homosexual half of the homo-hetero divide, no matter how “constructed” that divide may be. She respects the right and necessity of those who find solace and power in naming themselves as lesbian or gay and aligning themselves with a movement for the rights of sexual “minorities.”

Her sensitivity is most evident in her discussions of the gay closet in Chapter One. For example, she writes:

the deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption means that, like Wendy in *Peter Pan*, people find new walls springing up around them even as they drowse: every encounter with a

19. Sedgwick, *supra* note 1, at 73.

20. *Id.* at 70-71.

21. *Id.* at 72-73.

new classful of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure."²²

Her intelligence and savvy about the crucial issues for all gay, lesbian, and antihomophobic endeavors is demonstrated in her introduction when she discusses seven methodological and definitional axioms for explorations of sexuality and gender. In fact, her introduction and first chapter would be valuable reading for anyone concerned with issues in and surrounding the homosexual-heterosexual definitional crisis. And, as Sedgwick makes clear, this should include everyone.

Sedgwick's use of the English language is not for those who experience a pathological fear of dictionaries or a need for prose which adheres to the wisdom of Strunk and White. But her contorted "sentence acts" seem to parallel her bald refusal to provide straight answers to epistemologically incoherent questions. The result is prose which is often frustrating but just as often crackling with unique energy and humor.

Sedgwick's project is best viewed, in her own words, as an "introduction." She hopes to open discussions and never pretends to reach final conclusions. And there are particularly pressing directions in which this discussion needs to be taken by someone other than Sedgwick. As Terry Castle has pointed out in a criticism of *Between Men*, which remains valid for *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick's analysis only coincidentally addresses lesbian experience.²³ Castle demonstrates that lesbian desire displaces the controlling power of male homosocial bonding by creating a new structure in which the male is as isolated as the female is in patriarchy. Lesbian bonding is potentially more disruptive and is therefore even more policed than male homosexuality. Castle writes: "the blockage in her [Sedgwick's] theory, is intimately related, paradoxically, to its strength. It is precisely because Sedgwick has recognized so clearly the canonical power of male-male desire . . . that she does not 'get the point' of female-female desire."²⁴ The response to Castle's important observation should not be to diminish Sedgwick's contribution to attacking homophobia toward males nor should the places where Sedgwick's analysis does necessarily overlap with lesbian experience be ignored. Instead, one hopes

22. *Id.* at 68.

23. See Terry Castle, Sylvia Townsend Warner and the counterplot of Lesbian Fiction (1989).

24. *Id.* at 21.

that the response will be multitudes of antihomophobic projects, taking up their varied places near and far from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.