

Performance Anxiety: Sexuality and School Controversy

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The closet is commonly thought of as a small, isolated place where a distinct group of people hide. This assumption leads to school curricula addressing homosexuality as if it were only the concern of a small, distinct minority of students. However, this paper will argue, following Eve Sedgwick, that the closet occupies a more central position to the constitution of all sexualities. Thus, homosexuality is not a marginal force existing along side of heterosexuality but is central to the constitution of heterosexuality itself. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick contends that “an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition.”¹ Silences, Sedgwick contends, surround the closet, not just one silence, “but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it.”² These multiple and contextual silences about homosexuality flow through curricular debates as much as through literature. The task of this paper will be to outline the silences and ignorances that continue to proliferate, as well as the silences that have had to shift when part of the closet is opened.

Recent curricular debates in New York have partially performed an opening of the closet, particularly with regard both to reforms in multicultural curriculum designed to represent gay life and to AIDS educational plans attempting to address the needs of sexually active students of all orientations and activities. Though these openings have been far from uncontested, one aspect of the conservative effort to close the closet had the ironic effect of making gayness more central to heterosexuality’s own self-definition. These debates underscore Sedgwick’s observation that homosexuality is inextricably tied to the meaning of heterosexuality, that through their binary relation each is constituted in contrast to the other. Yet at the same time, homosexuality figures as that which is irredeemably outside of the heterosexual norm. While deconstructionist readings have been criticized for attending largely to intrapsychic identity development and textual strategies, the same dynamics Sedgwick describes pervade public curricular debates.

Sedgwick contends that the closet is the site of origin of unstable binaries beyond those of hetero/homo. Indeed the closet and the open secret — knowledge in some sense known but not circulated, an active ignorance — form the structure of a range of other binaries. For the purposes of this paper, the tension between visibility and invisibility, ignorance and knowledge, and childhood and sexuality will be central to examining the power effects attending the heterosexual/homosexual binary. The suspicion entailed by the invisibility of deviance within communities has the double effect of acknowledging the constant presence of sexual difference while at the same time encouraging the performance of increasingly

visible allegiances to heterosexuality. This allegiance to heterosexuality is performed through advocacy of “family values” or through advocacy of pre-heterosexual abstinent behavior — particularly in the form of “just say no.” Students are not simply encouraged to personally decide to be abstinent but are encouraged to voice this as a public statement against deviance, including class lessons where students actually practice verbalizing “no” or attempt to find new and creative ways to do so. This kind of visible if somewhat embattled performance of heterosexuality is also present in the New Right campaign for a return to “family values.” I want to argue this connection between the visible and invisible may provide a site of destabilization of the heterosexual/homosexual binary in a way that makes that binary and the careful boundary between the two terms increasingly difficult to maintain. Attempts to banish homosexuality, through publicly invoking it, actually make homosexuality more visible and contribute to the destabilization of heterosexuality. The point is not that the inadvertency of subversion of the binary is enough on its own however. Institutional and policy changes need to be made to ensure that proliferation of identity possibilities are nurtured, rather than actively repressed. George Chauncey’s work on the history of gay life in New York points to the ways laws instituted in the late 1940s prohibiting homosexual behavior in public places removed from sight gay communities that had flourished since the early 1900s.³ While he and Sedgwick point to the ways that homosexuality and other sexualities emerge even when under prohibition, the point is not to make the closet an object of nostalgia or to suggest that all prohibition will be its own undoing and that is all we need to know. But the fact of inadvertent subversion and shift even in what might usually be considered firm categories points to the possibility of progressive change.

I will rely on Eve Sedgwick’s distinction between minoritizing and universalizing models of identity to point out moments in curricular disputes that lend themselves to destabilizing the homo/hetero binary. The minoritizing model of identity marks out homosexuals as a distinct and quantifiable subgroup different from heterosexuality. The boundaries between the two identities are kept stable and clear in this model, which tries to conceive of homosexuality as something outside and away from the heterosexual norm. But Sedgwick contends that the universalizing model of identity may provide a more useful look at the complementarity, reliance, and mutual fragility of each term. According to Sedgwick’s universalizing model of the hetero/homosexual binary, both terms:

actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which, first, term B is not symmetrical with but subordinated to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B; hence, third, the question of priority between the supposed central and supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable, an instability caused by the fact that term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A.⁴

Sedgwick’s deconstructive reconceptualization of the relationship between homosexual and heterosexual helps to explain better not only the benefits of anti-homophobia education to those in the self-identified gay minority, but also to show the inevitable links and overlaps between all sexual identities and groups. This is not necessarily to argue that school policies that address the needs of gay and lesbians cannot helpfully use the minoritizing discourse. One example of the positive

possibilities of the minoritizing discourse is the Harvey Milk School in New York City whose purpose is to enable gay and lesbian students to graduate from high school. The school was founded to enable students subject to constant harassment because of their sexual orientation to stay in school. But even the Harvey Milk School shows the inevitable complications of identity-based approaches because a substantial proportion of its students do not identify as gay, but are instead gender non-conforming and thus subject to harassment on those grounds, not on the grounds of sexual orientation *per se*.

The predominant discourse in public school curricula that addresses homosexuality is the minoritizing discourse. In AIDS as well as multicultural curricula, homosexual people are portrayed as a distinct minority, whether represented as a risk group for HIV or as a differently organized family structure. Neither the AIDS nor the Children of the Rainbow multicultural curricula attempt to trouble the boundaries of sexual identity. The controversy generated, however, does. And I want to suggest that there is something in the public nature of the curricular disputes, as well as something about their focus on extending even minoritizing information about sexuality to children that generates particular anxieties about the sexual orientation of children. I think these controversies provide the space for parental fears that their children will not be like them and possibly conservative anxieties that heterosexuality is not as certain as it seems. The moment that heterosexuals have to assert themselves as “heterosexual” or as members of “traditional families,” the universalizing discourse creeps in; heterosexuality is no longer alone in the public eye and imagination.

AIDS-era additions to curricula show the overlap between the contemporary political visibility of gays and lesbians, coupled with an anxiety that homosexuality, despite stereotypes, does not always show. The advent of AIDS altered the public discussion of sexuality in ambivalent and contradictory ways. In part, AIDS provides a constant reminder of sexuality, but AIDS also reinforces connections between sexual behavior and contagion. This is particularly salient in a cultural context where there is a worry over invisible sexual deviance. The linkage between gayness and visible manifestations of disease provides some relief to the anxiety that gayness might be invisible. Simon Watney offers a stark example of how the minoritizing and universalizing discourses of sexuality overlap and contradict one another in a shifting interplay between visible and invisible. Watney observes that coverage of people with AIDS often focused on lesions associated with Kaposi's Sarcoma in representational schemes that at once reassure viewers that there are markers of AIDS and thus of homosexuality, while at the same time intoning warnings that HIV is not visible, and only testing can truly assure one that one has not been exposed to it.⁵ Similarly, a New York City subway campaign for HIV testing read, “You don't have AIDS. Now prove it,” challenging even those with no particular concern to make visible the fact of their HIV-negativity by having an HIV test.⁶ Here we see the attempt to move back from the universalizing discourse which implies that anyone might be hiding HIV and homosexuality, through messages that demand a concerted effort to perform proof of non-membership in a suspect group. On the one hand, HIV and homosexuality might be anywhere, but on the other hand,

there are ways to be certain of where they are. But these proofs are only temporary and the threat of one's implicatedness in HIV or in homosexuality become constant. This constant threat of the presence of either means that the visible proof of their opposite, non-seropositive status and heterosexuality must be performed in more explicitly public and embattled ways than previously. But these more panicked performances of dominant identities, by their panicked origins contradict their recuperative attempts. It is only because of the persistence of their opposite that they must change themselves. This parallels, I think, the development of "family values" that I will later explore.

With the AIDS epidemic also comes what Paula Treichler has referred to as "an epidemic of signification," where meanings of sexuality, gender, and disease multiply and splinter in unpredictable ways.⁷ There are wide ranging implications of this "epidemic of signification" in the area of AIDS education. The advent of AIDS has also underscored the extent to which sexuality is the site of multiple, fluid, and contradictory signifiatory practices. The meanings of sexuality and possibilities of sexual activity extend far beyond what can be grasped by adhering to even a clear homosexual/heterosexual binary. AIDS educators, particularly those associated with gay community-based projects noted that sexual identity was not always the central factor in determining which sexual activities a person might engage in. For some people, engaging in homosexual activity did not have the self-defining aspect as it did for others. A range of materials were developed in an attempt to accommodate the widest range of people possible, including materials highly contextualized in urban gay male subcultures, as well as materials directed at men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay. While gay community AIDS education projects realized early on in the epidemic that sexual identity was not coterminous with sexual activity, public school educational policy has been less attentive to the complicated relationship between sexual identity and sexual activity. This is largely because school policy, by adhering to the minoritizing model, avoids complicated questions about sexuality. But we will see that these efforts at containment spill over the boundaries of the heterosexual/homosexual boundary, making heterosexuality less and less sure of itself.

CONDOMS AND THE UNIVERSALIZING DISCOURSE OF SEXUALITY

Visibility of the previously invisible alters the way in which sexuality is addressed in public school curricula. This alteration of the accepted representation of sexuality is behind much of the controversy over high schools providing condoms to students in accordance with New York's public school AIDS education policy. There are many reasons for parental discomfort with the provision of condoms, including religious objections, a fear that sexual knowledge will move young people out of childhood and into sexuality too quickly, and also a fear connected to the very visibility of sexuality in the physical artifact of the condom itself. While certainly condoms seem to reinforce a version of sex as a penetrative act, they can also underscore the flexibility of sexual definition and activity. Condoms have the effect of technologically preventing the association between sex and reproduction. Not only does this open the possibility for acknowledging the obvious potential of recreational heterosexuality, but it additionally acknowledges the possibility for

recreational homosexuality. If condoms prevent reproduction while allowing the activities usually associated with reproduction to continue then the claim that sex was meant to be — naturally, by god, by law — reproductive, is no longer as easily sustainable. Non-reproductive sexuality is technologically no longer an impossibility. Once this break is made, it is clear that other non-reproductive sexual activities can equally make the claim to denaturalizing and multiplying sexuality. This anxiety over the potential for shifting identities and activities potential in condom usage encouraged the conservative New York State Board of Regents to initially declare that information on condoms would not be provided to students:

The Surgeon General of the United States, the Centers for Disease Control, and State and local Health departments have included condom use as one of the strategies for further preventing the spread of HIV. The Board of Regents view the use of condoms as extremely high risk behavior. The view that condoms should or can be used as a way to reduce the risk of transmission of AIDS should not be supported.⁸

This policy decision in 1987 followed the early logic of public school AIDS education that attempted to make HIV the occasion for reinforcing a message of abstinence. This example points, I think, to the kind of active production of ignorance Sedgwick refers to as part of the epistemology of the closet. The open secret here is adolescent sexual behavior but the ignorance produced through this anti-condom message attempts to cover over that possibility. When it became clear in 1991 that rates of adolescent and perinatal HIV infection were steadily rising despite a heavy curricular emphasis on abstinence, the policy was changed to include information about condom usage. Interestingly, the swing vote in New York City's condom provision policy based her decision on the rates of seropositivity in infants, not in sexually active youth, reinforcing the distinction between innocent victims of HIV and more culpable, sexually active or drug injecting young people with HIV.

With condoms newly made more visible, the Central Board of Education remained uncomfortable with the idea of adolescent sexuality. To ensure that the abstinence message would not be overshadowed by access to condoms, the Board required that AIDS educators take an "Abstinence Oath," swearing that abstinence would be stressed in every lesson on AIDS prevention. This oath, coupled with state-developed classroom lessons encouraging students to improve their sexual decision-making skills through examining a range of ways to say "no" to sex, reinforces adolescent sexuality as an open secret. On the one hand, objections to condom provisions and to sex and AIDS education in general worry that such curricular materials will cause young people to be sexually active. On the other hand, adolescent sexuality already stands out as a problem. In a sense, the "Abstinence Oath" and the lessons in saying "no" attempt to make public professions fight against the visibility of adolescent sexuality. Certainly, the provision of condoms is not the only visible manifestation of adolescent sexuality, as hallway behavior, teenage pregnancy rates, and HIV rates among young adults attest. But attempts to teach safer sex to students means that schools acknowledge and even provide the possibility for sexual activity with minimized consequences.

While AIDS has made ignoring sexuality considerably more difficult, as we have seen in the condom example, even in the midst of opening the issue of

adolescent sexuality, silences about adolescent sexuality may continue on even in spoken form. Likewise, health and education policy speaks about not speaking about homosexuality. Notably, the Helms Amendment forbade the use of federal funds in AIDS education that promoted homosexuality.⁹ Alabama requires that schools get permission from the State Health Agency to discuss homosexuality and Oklahoma requires that homosexuality only be discussed in relation to disease.¹⁰ In addition, what passes for public discussion of sexuality in public service announcements has more often bordered on the open secret than been informative. The “AIDS, get the facts” campaign, which does not actually attempt to give any “facts” beyond a phone number, as well as other messages showing young adults asserting that they can talk about sex, but never actually doing so, circulate information about the lack of information. These campaigns, as well as curricular prohibitions listed above, vacillate between producing ignorances and tantalizing viewers with just a glimpse into the closet. While there is room even in these obfuscatory campaigns for people to read themselves into the silences, this is clearly not enough in a context where people need access to information and strategies to help them avoid HIV.

GAY VISIBILITY, FAMILY VALUES AND THE EMBATTLED HETEROSEXUAL “MINORITY”

Because in this country HIV is so closely associated with homosexuality, objections to the condom provision and AIDS education in general blended together with conservative objections to the gay-inclusive Children of the Rainbow multicultural curriculum. These objections showed the inability of conservatives to see homosexuality as anything but sexual, even though the first grade lessons that caused the controversy only described the variety of family structures possible, including same-gender couples. The overlap perceived between the two curricula come through in Queens Board President Mary Cummins’s objection that the Children of the Rainbow lesson teaches “our kids that sodomy is acceptable but virginity is something weird.”¹¹

In the course of their objections to gay-inclusive curricula, conservatives begin to cast themselves as embattled minorities and attempt to suggest that gays are essentially taking over the world. In a sense, this appears to be true as the conceptualization of sexuality turns from clear-cut minority/majority distinctions to the more universalizing account wherein the implication of dissent from heterosexuality is more pervasive. The world view of heterosexuals is altered in ways that challenge the family as natural and inevitable. Conservatives have often argued that inclusion of information on homosexuality represents an assault on the family and nature (this may seem hyperbolic, but my point is they are quite accurate). The increased visibility of homosexuality has encouraged the assertion of visible heterosexuality, often in the call to return to “family values.” Certainly other social shifts or perceived shifts have led the New Right to trumpet a return to the family but I think that “family” rather than “traditional” indicates a particular attempt to bring heterosexuality, specifically marked as such, into the public in a way that provides a refuting reply to the call for gay pride. This is after all heterosexual pride but it is a pride that seems to feel it has not had to assert itself in quite this way before. As a public movement that bolsters heterosexuality against homosexuality, as opposed to against a generational shift in morals, the new “family values” is firmly cognizant

of homosexuality as its enemy. That this is a battle to be fought out over the bodies of the young is clear in the New Right mobilizations to secure positions on school boards and to work on parental advisory committees charged with tailoring sex and AIDS educational curricula to local tastes. Indeed, in the 1980s and early 1990s, the greatest victories of the New Right had been in sex-related issues,¹² particularly those regarding homosexuality. This trend is evident in public referenda overturning local ordinances against anti-gay discrimination.

While the intention of the opponents of New York City's gay-inclusive Children of the Rainbow multicultural curriculum was to ensure that information about gay outsiders did not make it into classrooms, I would also argue that substantial anxiety about the possibility of children becoming gay bleeds over into the seeming concern that outsiders will be allowed in. In other words, part of the anxiety is that those who are considered insiders will turn out to have been nascent outsiders all along. This fuels, I think, the dramatic worry over what information about homosexuality will do to children and also points to the shakiness of heterosexuality entailed by this aspect of the universalizing discourse. This becomes clear as conservative parents expressed fears that the "Children of the Rainbow" lessons on gay families were actually attempting to teach their children sodomy. Mixing criticism of the AIDS curriculum with criticism of the "Children of the Rainbow" curriculum, 50 people marched in City Hall Park chanting, "No way Jose, don't teach our children to be gay."¹³ Members of Concerned Parents for Educational Accountability "spoke of AIDS education and pedophilia in the same breath."¹⁴ One parent, pointing to a passage in "Children of the Rainbow" argued, "Now they're going to think that if any man touches me and I'm a little boy, it's O.K., or if any woman touches me and I'm a little girl, it's O.K."¹⁵ Clearly there was more than just a conflation of the two curricula going on, but also an airing of misconceptions equating gayness with child abuse, much like earlier parents' arguments that condoms and information about sex would take away their children's innocence. But these new arguments against gay influence in public schools move much further and suggest that the possibility of homosexuality exists for their children. The very embattled status of heterosexuality is reflected in the following characterization of what the new visibility of homosexuality would do to the family structure. According to one conservative the implementation of the Children of the Rainbow curriculum paralleled "what Hitler did before the war, before the Holocaust. He took the youngest children, probably in the first grade, brainwashed them for a couple of years and sent them home to snitch on their parents."¹⁶

In response to the Children of the Rainbow curriculum, the conservative Family Defense Council called on members to "Help David overcome the Gay Goliath."¹⁷ In a city where there is no anti-discrimination policy that covers sexual orientation and where the Christian Coalition, Family Defense Council, and Mary Cummins managed to bring down the Schools Chancellor and help defeat the mayor who appointed him, conservatives do not seem to occupy the position of David. Their pamphlets further attest to their victories and to their work on "combating pro-homosexual school curriculums and exposing the gay political agenda," warning readers that "although *homosexuals* are few in number, they are *heavily funded* and

supported, *in part, by our government.*"¹⁸ In their newsletter, the call for donations is placed directly below an article claiming "AIDS Gets Disproportionate Funding."¹⁹ Other articles document the corporations and organizations that support "radical homosexuals" — Webster's Dictionary, President Clinton, Clinton's health plan, NYNEX, the American Historical Association — all of which add up to making gays look quite powerful.²⁰

These fears about gayness encroaching on previously seemingly non-gay areas is a recognition that gayness is now, on the one hand, more visible and thus more likely to be a possibility of a lifestyle that may be lived in the public, and gayness is also, on the other hand, always potentially invisible. There is no way to recognize the basic gay or lesbian in the street; at least the activists helpfully attire themselves in distinctive ways, but otherwise the ability to sort sexualities is quite complicated — and in more ways than a simple heterosexual/homosexual binary allows for, as well. What conservative parents may have reasoned, then, was that they needed a way to perform their own sexuality and the public decisions and debates to remove or revise information on homosexuality served as a public ritual of heterosexual bonding. Unless one firmly asserts "family values" the potential that one's sexuality is in question is heightened.

Much of the response to these controversies does lead into a kind of politics that solidifies the binary of heterosexual/homosexual, but there is also the persistent intrusion of the universalizing discourse of sexuality as each term calls into question the isolation of the other. Instead of solidifying these identities another option is present through the persistent relation of gay to heterosexual and invisible to visible that broadens the range of diversity possible within communities and warns against too easily presuming the limits of community. The cost of this strong limit on community appears to be the persistent anxiety of invisible difference within. The controversies in New York City that entangled gay-inclusive multiculturalism with AIDS and a general fear of non-heterosexuality opened the conversation about community membership and about sexuality in ways that turned homosexuality from a lurking menace to a real substantial threat to previously seemingly fully accepted ways of life. Even while much of this change in perspective is still couched in terms of intolerance, the shift has occurred. And even while a backlash is possible, it begins from a different place than before. Heterosexuality no longer has unquestioned hegemony and homosexuality is no longer so clearly on the outside.

Sexuality became a crucial centerpiece of educational concerns during the controversies over the AIDS curriculum and "Children of the Rainbow." The very arguments and turmoil these issues brought out helped stimulate the largest turnout in school board elections in twelve years. An estimated 12.5 to 15 percent of those eligible voted in the elections.²¹ This was nearly double the usual rate and 90 percent greater than the previous board elections.²² The implementation and arguments over the curricula may not have been the finest version of democracy in practice, but the very acts of making public issues that were heavily in contention inspired people on all sides of both debates to become more politically active and to vote in elections that usually do not stir interest. The Christian Coalition's use of grassroots organizing seemed to have shaken up gay activists who had not been as concerned as they

might have been with issues not directly related to AIDS and gay inclusion in curricula. Progressive coalitions formed and lobbied for progressive candidates. In the end, both sides claimed victory (it was, perhaps, the one thing they agreed on). The Christian Coalition claimed that 51 percent of its candidates had been elected to school boards.²³ Progressives claimed to have won in “every area that was contested,” getting progressive candidates onto conservative boards and winning a majority in two key conservative districts.²⁴ The results did not settle any of the social issues that had sparked political activity on both sides, but the results did guarantee that debate would continue. While conservatives had been attempting to remove issues from children’s consideration, they, if unintentionally, began a more visible public conversation on those very issues they did not consider appropriate for public discussion.

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1. Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1.
 2. *Ibid.*, 3.
 3. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).
 4. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 10.
 5. Simon Watney, “The Spectacle of AIDS,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 71-86.
 6. Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 151.
 7. Paula Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification,” in Crimp, *AIDS Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, 17-31.
 8. New York State. State Department of Education. Bureau of Curriculum Development. *AIDS Instructional Guide: Grades K-12* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987), 162.
 9. The bill to which the amendment was attached was eventually enveloped into S2889, which in turn became the Health Omnibus Programs Extension Act of 1988 § 2-2500-102 STAT. 3093 (1988). The specific part of the law that the Helms Amendment formed is Title XV, sec. 2500.
 10. Marie Schumacher, *HIV/AIDS Education Survey: Profiles of State Policy Actions*, (Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Boards of Education, 1989), 11.
 11. *New York Times*, 6 Sept. 1992, 51.
 12. Matthew C. Moen, *The Transformation of the Christian Right* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992).
 13. *New York Times*, 6 Sept. 1992, 51.
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. *New York Times*, 6 Oct. 1992, B6.
 17. *Family Defense Council* pamphlet.
 18. *Ibid.*
 19. Howard L. Hurwitz, ed. *Family Defense Council Newsletter 27* (March 1994): 4.
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. Donna Minkowitz, “The Wrong Side of the Rainbow,” *The Nation* (28 June 1993): 901.
 22. N’Tanya Lee et al., “Whose Kids? Our Kids! Race, Sexuality and the Right in New York City’s Curriculum Battles,” *Radical America* 25, no. 1 (March 1993): 17.
 23. Christian Coalition flyer.
 24. Minkowitz, “The Wrong Side of the Rainbow,” 901.