

Opening the Closet Door: Sexualities Education and “Active Ignorance”

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In “Performance Anxiety: Sexuality and School Controversy,” Cris Mayo utilizes deconstructive strategies from Eve Sedgwick’s text, *Epistemology of the Closet*,¹ to illustrate the ways in which conservative resistance to AIDS and gay-inclusive multicultural curricula ironically undermine, rather than reinforce, the stability of the homosexual/heterosexual binary. Describing the shifting discursive ground as a partial opening of the closet, Mayo suggests that new possibilities for progressive action are available in the wake of the controversy. Mayo’s inquiry follows the lead Sedgwick articulates in the following passage from *Epistemology of the Closet*:

About the foundational impossibilities of modern homo/heterosexual definition, the questions we have been essaying so far have been, not how this incoherent dispensation can be rationalized away or set straight, not what it means or even how it means, but what it makes happen, and how.²

If I understand her correctly, what the New York State curriculum controversies “make happen,” in Mayo’s view, is a significantly different opening of the homosexual closet, an opening that occurs not as an effect of a minoritizing politics (such as was spawned by Stonewall, or as is exemplified by the slogan “Gay and Proud”) but, rather, an opening that occurs as an effect of conservative resistance in the shape of performative heterosexuality. In Mayo’s words, “attempts to banish homosexuality, through publicly invoking [the heterosexual/homosexual binary] actually make homosexuality more visible.”

It is this increased visibility which augers well for possibilities of progressive change, says Mayo, at least in so far as increased visibility can be coupled with institutional measures aimed at ensuring that diverse identity possibilities are nurtured.

I think that Mayo’s analysis is provocative. Her project speaks to me on two different levels: first, as a substantive study of sexuality discourses and the progressive, anti-homophobic social action that they make possible; and, second, as a metatheoretical study of what Sedgwick calls an epistemology of the closet. Both of these concerns are of interest to philosophers of education, the former on the basis of its analysis of anti-homophobic curricula, and the latter on the basis of its potential to analyze the construction of “open secrets” or, synonymously, “active ignorance,” within philosophy of education discourse.

Mayo considers the contradictory relation of minoritizing and universalizing sexuality discourses to be the most crucial element of Sedgwick’s deconstruction of sexuality discourse. This is not to say, however, that it can be considered in isolation from Sedgwick’s accounts of the logic of homo/heterosexual binaries or the silencing effects of active ignorance, which is to say, technologies of the “open secret.” Each of these additional strategies plays an integral role in Mayo’s account

of the shift in conservative discourse on sexuality. The silencing effects of active ignorance occur, for instance, as conservatives first ignore, then muzzle, then paint as threatening to the sanctity of the family, accounts of sexuality that stand outside the narrow confines of heterosexual, reproductive sex. Nonetheless, for Mayo it is the encroachment of universalizing perspectives upon conservative discourse that is the most salient pattern.

Mayo's analysis of the Rainbow curriculum illuminated most strongly for me the movement within conservative positions from the minoritizing position of simply excluding from school programs references to "minority" life choices, to the fully performative heterosexuality of certain educational campaigns: for instance, the "just say no (to sex; to perverted sex)" and "family values" campaigns. It is clear, from this line of inference, that one of the major premises of minoritizing sexual discourse, the complete alterity of homo/heterosexuality, has been abandoned. As Mayo says: conservative parents "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 heterosexuality. " "Unless one firmly asserts family values," Mayo continues, "the potential that one's sexuality is in question is heightened."

I am convinced, by Mayo's account, that the conservative resistance she describes does effect a shift in the discursive ground on which sexualities debates are carried out; however, I think that alternative readings of the discursive impact of conservative resistance can be supported through reference to Sedgwick's deconstructive strategies. I attempt to spell out here one possible alternative reading; nonetheless, I want to make it clear that I see my reading as one that stands alongside, and in creative tension to, the one Mayo has set out. I do not aim to supplant the reading that Mayo has provided; indeed, my reading is indebted to the insightful observations Mayo has made with respect to the discursive path of that resistance.

Where Mayo emphasizes the significance in shifts between minoritizing and universalizing discourses, I want, for the sake of further inquiry, to emphasize changes in the nature of epistemic warrant associated with the "open secret." In particular, I suggest that the possibility of connecting the issue of visibility with the strategy of "active ignorance" is a direct effect of conservative rhetoric against progressive curricula. In this brief space, let me simply list two considerations in support of this alternative reading.

First, I expect that the shifts Mayo identifies between minoritizing and universalizing discourses are temporary and local. Sedgwick indicates that both perspectives can be seen in most accounts of sexuality since the nineteenth century. Second, and most important, for me, the movement toward a universalizing discourse in one area of curriculum in no way precludes a preference for minoritizing discourse in another area of curriculum. It seem plausible, and even likely, that conservatives who move in the direction of performative heterosexuality in order to combat the Rainbow curricula in one moment, will be quick to enforce government limitations on AIDS education for homosexuals in the next. Sedgwick's analysis of juridical double binds, in which various jurists cite contradictory perspectives in the same or

related rulings, seems to suggest strongly that when conservatives utilize universalizing discourse, they feel confident in their ability to do so without undermining the credibility of minoritizing positions they might also want to take.³

In contrast to Mayo's confidence that shifting discursive positions works against the salience of the homo/heterosexual binary and, as a consequence, in favor of progressive action, I expect that in many, if not most social contexts, conservatives have a lot of room to invoke completely contradictory positions with impunity. Nonetheless, I believe that Mayo's assessment of the overall effects of the controversy over school curricula is accurate. The ground has shifted in such a way that any backlash, should it be mounted, would of necessity begin from a different place. My view is that conservatives have underestimated the discursive impact of the loss of their unmitigated access to "the open secret." As Elizabeth Spelman astutely recognized, privilege works best when it does not have to name itself.⁴ Only so long as conservatives were able to resist intrusion of public spaces (like curricula) by feigning ignorance of homosexual alternatives, be they of a minoritizing view or a universalizing view, were they able to maintain the privilege of heterosexual invisibility (and, hence, ubiquity).

In closing, I want to mention briefly two questions that neither Mayo nor I have been able to address, and then I want to comment briefly on the broader implications of this line of inquiry for philosophy of education discourse.

First, I think it is absolutely necessary, politically and epistemologically, to note the active ignorance implicit within analyses of homo/heterosexual binaries that do not attend to gender differences. I am reminded by Sedgwick's analysis, as by the current discussion, of the time-worn joke about all of those invisible lesbians. In school contexts, with HIV and gay-inclusive curricula central in our focus, the astounding persistence of the lack of attention paid to the specificity of lesbian experiences demands attention. If not today, then soon!

The other set of questions I would raise follows on the recognition that contradictory discourses can work in conservatives' favor just as easily as they can work against them. Sedgwick makes this recognition a cornerstone of her analysis. She writes:

And rather than embrace an idealist faith in the necessarily, immanently self-corrosive efficacy of the contradictions inherent to these definitional binarisms, I will suggest instead that contests for discursive power can be specified as competitions for the material or rhetorical leverage required to set the terms of, and profit in some way from, the operations of such an incoherence of definition.⁵

Once again, those of us who would pursue further the kinds of analysis that Mayo and Sedgwick have made possible have our work cut out for us as we attempt to identify the kinds of conditions and political strategies that will favor anti-homophobic effects of discourses.

Finally, I want to draw attention to the second "outing" that occurs as we consider Mayo's project. Apart from the substantive understandings she engenders through her analysis of conservative resistance to progressive school curricula, the very fact of her presentation effects at least a partial opening of the closet at PES.

Specific dynamics of silence are interrupted. Having now attended to the dynamics of the “open secret” as it functioned in one particular curricular debate in New York State, we at PES can not participate in active ignorance of hetero/homosexual binaries within philosophy of education discourse in the same way, with the same silence, as before this session. With this observation in mind then, I want to close my commentary with a strong endorsement for the ways Mayo has managed to put a foot in our particular closet door.

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

2. *Ibid.*, 213.

3. See Sedgwick’s discussion, *Epistemology of the Closet*, of two cases: *Acanfora vs. Montgomery County*, and *Bowers vs. Hardwick*, (1986), for explication of jurists’ willingness to embrace contradictory definitions of sexuality in order to support gay-punitive rulings; 69-70; 74-82.

4. Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988) 76.

5. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 11.