On First Looking into Sedgwick’s Epistemology

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MARKING the 25th anniversary of the publication of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s strange and difficult book The Epistemology of the Closet (1990) is a tough job, but somebody has to do it. Let me try in a rather personal way.

My first encounter with Sedgwick’s magnum opus occurred when I began researching my honors thesis. I was writing a dissertation on the queer pleasures of celluloid terrain of Taylor’s cinematic corpus, concentrating on Giant (1956), Suddenly, Last Summer (1959), and Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1964). It was my advisor who led me to the Epistemology.

In the book, Sedgwick blends anecdote, theory, and scholarship to argue that the closet is a longstanding and complex metaphor in Western history that circulates around meanings and articulations of homosexuality. In her theoretical paradigm, Sedgwick argues that the closet provides a spatial metaphor with implications both for those inside (invisible from the outside, self-concealing for those within) and for those outside the closet, whether gay or straight, who are not hiding their sexual desires.

The book’s aim was to unpack the many complex and conflicting meanings of “the closet”—that legendary and deeply ingrained metaphor of homosexuality and its concealment. Sedgwick’s project was to re-articulate the meanings of the closet and examine them primarily in partnership with the 19th-century works of Henry James, Oscar Wilde, and other iconic queer-minded writers of the time. Their novels offered her a means by which to examine the “trope of the unspokenable” in the linguistic terrain of the late Victorian era.

As I read more, I began to see the importance of the seen and unseen “closet” in Liz Taylor’s films, an idea that was so central to Sedgwick’s approach to deconstructing this powerful metaphor in our recent cultural history. In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1958), I saw Paul Newman’s character Brick linger in the bathroom a little longer than perhaps he should have while talking to wife Maggie (Taylor)—a man who might be struggling with homoerotic urges. In Suddenly, Last Summer I saw Violet (Katharine Hepburn) sit a moment longer than necessary in her “elevator chair” and began to wonder what she was hiding. In Giant, James Dean’s Jett Rink vainly tried to wash unclean cups in his kitchen as he contemplated that cloistered space in which his real (gay) self resided.

The closet began its metaphorical life as a trope of gay culture, but its meaning has been broadened to include any space of secrecy or shame where someone hides an aspect of their identity (“He’s a closet conservative”). In Sedgwick’s Epistemology, the closet sets up the language of dichotomy: one can either be in the closet or outside of it. But, of course, things are more complicated than that. For example, the closet can also be a bridge between these two realms, a position that allows one to inhabit both worlds simultaneously.

Sedgwick speaks of “silences” or “preterition” in texts, which became for me one of the most fascinating of her ideas. A self-identified queer person staying in the closet is a form of preterition—a silent speech act, an omission, something overlooked or neglected over and over again. When someone doesn’t acknowledge their sexual orientation, they engage in a form of preterition. Here Sedgwick introduces the idea of the “unspokenable,” which proved to be a recurring motif for me as I watched Taylor film after Taylor film. Sedgwick locates the silences and absences in texts from the history of homosexuality as an “unspokenable” act. Thus, for example, a speaker might allude to someone being “that way” or “so inclined”: homosexuality or queerness has a long history of being identified by not mentioning it.

The movie version of Suddenly, Last Summer is a case in point. The film tells the story of Catherine (Elizabeth Taylor), who has witnessed the gruesome murder of her cousin Sebastian while they were vacationing overseas. It soon comes to light that his mother Violet (Katharine Hepburn) had helped her son to procure young men to feed his carnal desires, and that Violet attempted to conceal this secret history until Catherine came back from the fateful trip, traumatized by what she had witnessed. Suddenly, Last Summer offers a fascinating example of a narrative in which the central fact of the drama, Sebastian’s homosexuality, is never actually named or even referred to euphemistically, though there is no doubt about its reality. Moreover, given that it’s a play by Tennessee Williams, there is no homosexuality without a hint of madness, which is fitting given the long and painful history of homosexuality being defined as a mental illness.

Ultimately what Sedgwick’s Epistemology offered was a rare and unforgettable journey into the unspokenable. After my own brief anecdotal experiences with homosexuality as an “unspokenable sin,” I was truly enriched by understanding the politics of binaries, and how queerness is an important and necessary idea to help us uncover the complex and profound meanings of texts produced in times when homosexuality was not visible or vocalized or even believed to exist.

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Similarly, Sedgwick expresses that the binary of sexuality limits freedom and understanding. She continues on to state that modern western culture must be destroyed because the idea of a binary is so heavily embedded into culture, only then can humanity experience freedom from that binary. History. Some crossplayers attempt to fully embody their character of choice, taking into consideration clothing, behavior, physicality, and everything in-between to make sure they “pass.” With Epistemology of the Closet, Sedgwick is the first to deconstruct the idea of a binary analysis, arguing that binaries and binary oppositions are too simplistic to serve as a productive framework in which to analyze sexuality and gender. The Sedgwick Speech trope as used in popular culture. A fierce battle is about to ensue. One brave Red Shirt will step forward and give an uplifting speech. The Horrible Histories book about the era includes a cartoon which depicts two soldiers looking at Sedgwick’s corpse, one saying, “Pity he wasn’t an elephant.” See also General Barnard Bee, the guy who got Lieutenant General Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson his moniker at First Manassas with his speech, “There is Jackson standing like a stone wall. Epistemology of the Closet is a book published in 1990 by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who is considered one of the founders of queer studies. In Epistemology of the Closet, Sedgwick argues that standard binary oppositions limit freedom and understanding, especially in the context of sexuality. Sedgwick argues that limiting sexuality to homosexuality or heterosexuality, in a structured binary opposition, is just too simplistic.