

WAGS 31: Fourth Essay

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Due: May 10 (Monday) 7:00 PM by e-mail

Office hours: Tues. 3:00-5:00

Grade-per-day penalty starts May 11 at 7:00 PM

Fri. 10:00-11:00

Length: 1,250-1,500 words

Editorial conferences to discuss rough drafts:

May 6 - 9

(see CMS page for times)



The Epistemology of the Canon

Has there ever been a gay Socrates?

Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare?

Has there ever been a gay Proust?

Does the Pope wear a dress? If these questions startle, it is not least as tautologies. A short answer, though a very incomplete one, might be that not only have there been a gay Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust but that their names are Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick¹

This quotation was on the first slide we saw in January, and Sedgwick's essay, "The Epistemology of the Closet" (in the collection of that name), puts another light on it. Following Michel Foucault, she explores homosexuality as the linchpin of modern ways of knowing ("epistemology"): Modern power is based on knowledge – of secrets – especially sexual secrets – especially *the* secret: homosexuality. Queerness, rather than disrupting the social order – as unnaturalness, license, foreign matter, filth – underlies the ways of knowing that shape the social

¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Introduction: Axiomatic," *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990): 52.

order. Now we know the full meaning of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in Genesis. Or, in the spirit of Sedgwick, to paraphrase the Fourth Gospel: “In the beginning was the closet”

To draw out some implications: If the modern (but not the ancient) texts on our syllabus habitually link queerness to secrets, those secrets do not just reveal the nature of queerness but also the power dynamics of all knowledge (patriarchy with its pants down, as it were). Or, to use Sedgwick’s preferred terms, the search for a Queer Canon involves a minoritizing perspective (some would say “essentializing”), while a universalizing perspective would see queerness – or, better, a polymorphous sexuality ungovernable by heterosexual norms – at the base of all artistic creation. Has there ever been a gay Socrates? Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare?

The following topics, which go in all directions, deal with works in the era when *the* secret was not just feared for its danger but also suspected as being powerful.

Be sure that you really compare the texts rather than talking about theme X (closets, confessions, betrayal) in text A and then in text B. Cross-refer the texts and show how they are mutually illuminating. If you haven’t read “Some Ideas from Essays” (posted on *Rikipedia* at May 10), please do so.

One: The Erotics of Space: Closet / Cell *Giovanni + Kiss*

>As a site of secrecy and romance, how does Molina and Valentin’s cell respond to the tradition of “closets” as exemplified in Giovanni’s room?

Some questions that may offer an opening: How are these rooms transformed or transformative? Can the construction of a “closet” be an act of resistance? How do the two males generate (or not generate) gender roles between themselves?

Two: The Usual Tragic Ending *Kiss + the tradition (your choice)*

We’ve tracked the tendency of serious works on queerness to end tragically with death or at least self-sacrifice, and sometimes two victims (both Basil and Dorian).

>Does Molina’s death refashion, comment on, or just continue this stereotype?

It’s up to you to decide which earlier cases you use for comparison. Feel free to work with influential works not on the syllabus (i.e., “The Children’s Hour,” “Bent,” “Brokeback Mountain,” “Boys Don’t Cry,” *The Line of Beauty*). Or loop back for contrast to *Orlando: A Biography* as a work that doesn’t end tragically.

Three: True Confessions I *Confessions + Kiss*

As Foucault argues in the *History of Sexuality*, the proliferation of sexualities has been driven by the growing importance of various forms of confession: religious, legal, psychoanalytic, legal. As we've discussed, confession entails a power differential between the confessing subject and the confessor (priest, policeman, sexologist, psychiatrist, reader) and the categories of sin, crime, perversion, neurosis, or genre (e.g., literature or porn) into which the confessor fits the secrets.

>Compare how *Confessions* and *Kiss* respond to the tradition of homosexuality as *the secret to be confessed, with the reader as the ultimate confessor.*

It may be helpful to recall that the confessional elements of earlier works often do not put the reader in a complicated position. We know to respect Oedipus for his zero-tolerance policy on secrets in extracting information from others and from himself. In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades' confession of his obsession with Socrates and humiliating rejection may provoke sympathy and amusement, but we know that Alcibiades is dangerously deceiving and self-deceived. Amid the moral uncertainties of *Dorian Gray*, we naturally admire Basil's confession to Dorian and martyrdom while attempting to play confessor.

Four: True Confessions II *Giovanni + Kiss*

This is previous topic with the trickier case of *Giovanni* as a failed confession of sorts, such that the reader's job is in some ways more complicated than with *Confessions*, though the element of crime and punishment (*Giovanni*'s execution) resonates with *Kiss*.

>Compare how *Giovanni* and *Kiss* respond to the tradition of homosexuality as *the secret to be confessed, with the reader as the ultimate confessor.*

Five: Queens *Giovanni + Kiss*

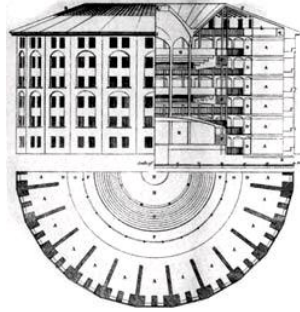
As we've seen, effeminate gays are often targets in otherwise queer(ish) texts: Jonathan Brockett and the denizens of the Paris bars in *Well*; Horace ("Lily") Langtry in *House*; those same Parisian barflies in *Giovanni*. In the demimonde, however, they do know their way around and can be prophetic.

>Compare how Baldwin and Puig respond to the stereotype of the queen.

Feel free to fold in "Tongues Untied," if it helps.

Six: Whip me! Beat me! Make Me Do Theory!

Foucault, “Panopticism” + *Kiss*



One of Foucault’s most influential essays (because one can actually understand it) is “Panopticism” (posted on *Rikipedia* at May 10) from *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), which discusses how state surveillance leads to self-surveillance by individuals. Foucault works from the management of plagues and from prison architecture (Jeremy Bentham’s “panopticon”, above) to the concept of “disciplinary society” based both on legal discipline and on the disciplines in the professional sense. The preceding “confessions” topics assume these connections (i.e., sexology, psychoanalysis, et al.). Without necessarily responding to Foucault, Puig makes some of the same connections, e.g., between the “authorities” who run the prison and the “authorities” in the footnotes and the “authorities” who read *Kiss* (critics, professors, general readers).

>Using Foucault’s notion of “disciplinary society,” discuss how the play of disciplines in *Kiss* offers or does not offer possibilities for resistance.

A complicating question is how one locates the embedded film narratives among the “disciplines”. Are they pure escapism, produced by capitalism and stupefying the masses (as if a new “opiate of the proletariat,” as Marx labeled religion)? Do they reinforce authority structures (e.g., psychiatry, fascism, compulsory heterosexuality)? Or do they offer a malleable body of images out of which one can create a new consciousness?

Seven: Whip me! Beat me! Send Me to School! “Mädchen” + *Confessions*

We have discussed how the schools in “Mädchen” and *Confession* shape the development of sexuality by imposing norms and containing the resistance that they provoke. These schools are also microcosms of their respective societies, or at least the elites.

>Compare how “Mädchen” and *Confessions* use schools as to make a link between their authoritarian societies and the performance of sexual deviance. Does either work see homosexuality as liberatory?



Eight: The Double Agent “Mädchen” + *Kiss*

>Compare Fräulein von Bernburg with Molina in their shifting roles of both acting for institutional authority and resisting it. How do these double roles relate to their sexuality?

A challenge of this topic is that there is so much to say about Molina, including his narration of “Her True Glory,” while Fräulein von Bernburg will need a close reading of a limited number of scenes.

Nine: The Color White *Passing* + *Giovanni*

One of the major outcomes of various responses to the third assignment (see “Some Ideas”) was an appreciation of how socially constructed is the world presented by Larsen. As we discussed, the ambiguous racial dynamics imply sexual dynamics, even more ambiguously. So, in the verse direction, does Baldwin’s decision to address homosexuality behind the veil of whiteness – David’s tall, blond, American whiteness – make an argument about race?

>In *Passing* and *Giovanni*, how do the dynamics of sexuality and race reflect on one another?

Feel free to use the more overt treatment of race and sexuality in “Tongues Untied.”

Ten: Queering Narrative “Edipo Re” + *Kiss*

Pasolini (b. 1922) and Puig (b. 1932) share some biographical similarities. Both were queer leftists (Pasolini was a Communist), and both wrote screenplays and novels. “Edipo Re” (1967) and *Kiss* (1976) address the twin legacies of Marx and Freud, and both works mix disparate materials in order to thwart the audience’s desire to suspend disbelief and enter a gratifying world of illusion. “Edipo Re” has multiple epochs, locations, musical, and costuming traditions, just as Puig’s narrator-less text mixes dialogue, footnotes, and documents. Both works juxtapose scenes of romance (in which all roads lead to mom) to political violence and evoke the

conventions of detective stories. Both explore the connections of sexual and political secrets in ways that resonate with Foucault's analyses from the same years.

>Compare how Pasolini and Puig use unfamiliar and disorienting artistic forms to reframe stigmatized (incestuous, gay) sexual activity.

Eleven: Filth *Confessions / Giovanni / Kiss* (two out of three)

People said he that he was very nice, but I confess that his utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's stomachs.

--*Giovanni's Room* (p. 27)

David's reaction above to the cross-dressed youth in Guillaume's bar signals the amount of attention the novel pays to versions of filth: excrement, body odor, rubbish, mess, even the Seine as dump. The trail through *Confessions*, from Kochan's post-partum bath to the final spilled beverage, is damp, unclean, sometimes poisonous (auto-intoxication), sometimes oceanic and ecstatic. And Molina, we know, should have been a mom. The connection of queerness with filth is stereotypical, but filth can be fertilizer, and some bodily fluids (blood, semen, mother's milk) can be life-giving or filthy depending on location and use.

>Compare how Mishima, Baldwin, and Puig (2 out of 3) evoke and transform (or harden) the associations of queerness with filth.

It may or may not be helpful to consider the famous definition of dirt as "matter out of place" by anthropologist Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (1966). If there is no place for queerness, then it's dirt. But, to go back to Foucault and Sedgwick above, *queer = filthy* might be the tip-off about how the whole system of order works in the first place.

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Intellectual honesty:

Please consult *Intellectual Honesty* on the course CMS page. Use of secondary sources other than those on the syllabus, including the Internet, is not required or encouraged. All sources used should be cited. The reading questions, material from discussion, and e-mailed questions/comments may be taken as common knowledge and need not be cited. I refer any suspected plagiarism to the Office of the Dean of Students. When in doubt, please contact me. Since it's hard to keep track of influences, it's probably prudent to avoid reading any secondary sources on the texts you're addressing.