



The Closet

by Tirza True Latimer

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The word "closet" designates a space of secrecy, confidentiality, or cautious privacy. We say that a gay person is "in the closet" or "closeted" when she or he dissimulates the object of her or his sexual desire.

Coming out of the closet, though, as Didier Eribon has remarked, can never be achieved once and for all. The gesture must be repeated in each and every new context. It is entirely possible, what is more, to occupy a position that is neither completely "in" nor entirely "out" of the closet--to be "out" within a circle of friends, for instance, while preserving a degree of discretion in the workplace.

Being in the closet is facilitated by the fact that heterosexuality is nearly always presumed as the default orientation until or unless an individual announces or signals his or her status as a non-heterosexual.

The Closet in Post-Stonewall Politics and Discourse

The closet occupies a place of prominence in post-Stonewall politics and discourse. Notions of the closet and its functions have been hammered out in several of the foundational texts of queer theory.

For example, Judith Butler argues that the logic of the closet is circular. Being "out" depends upon and produces the condition of being "in," and coming out of the closet, in order to signify, reproduces and maintains the structure of the closet.

In contrast, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick conceives of the closet as a transparent enclosure. Homosexuality may be hidden in revealing ways, she observes, making it identifiable to some and not to others, a sort of "open secret."

Both would agree that the power of the closet to structure relations derives from the fact that ignorance/invisibility and knowledge/visibility generate understanding in equal measures and that these terms give meaning to one another.

In the period before Stonewall, much homophile activity was devoted to preserving the closet, that is, protecting the privacy of homosexuals and sparing them the sometimes calamitous consequences of being exposed. After Stonewall, however, the political cry was "Out of the closet and into the streets!" Activists believed that only through coming out could homosexuals build a mass movement for social change.

In the 1980s and 1990s, in the midst of the AIDS epidemic, many activists in the United States and Britain embraced the practice of "outing" public figures--such as legislators, bishops, celebrities, and media moguls--as a political tactic. In breaking the traditional code of silence that preserved the closet as a refuge for people of power and fame, the activists successfully exposed the hypocrisy of several individuals and also garnered a great deal of attention for glbtq issues. However, that practice remains controversial precisely because in a homophobic society the choice to come out of the closet is often seen as intensely personal.

Because conservatives tend to be deeply disturbed by the visibility of glbtq people, they typically urge out people to return to the closet. In doing so, they in effect admit that what they object to is the challenge that out glbtq people pose to heterosexist assumptions.

The same attitude finds expression in the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy of the United States military, under which homosexuals are ostensibly welcome in the armed forces as long as they remain in the closet.

The Closet in History

The closet as a historical concept first materialized, along with the homosexual as a historical subject as defined by Foucault, toward the end of the nineteenth century in Western Europe.

At this time, attitudes towards same-sex desire were undergoing codification in arenas of secular authority, such as medicine, psychiatry, and the courts of law. In 1885, for instance, the English parliament ratified the Labouchère Amendment, also known as the blackmailer's charter, which criminalized homosexual acts in private.

The Labouchère amendment was invoked ten years later to condemn Oscar Wilde for "acts of gross indecency." As a result of Wilde's highly publicized trials and subsequent outbreaks of homophobic panic (an attack on the Decadent journal *The Yellow Book* among them), many of the gay men in Wilde's entourage sought the cover of marriage or the sanctuary of Catholicism, in effect retreating into the closet.

Catholicism as a Closet

The decadent poet John Gray (allegedly the prototype for Wilde's Dorian Gray) and his lover André Raffalovich converted to Catholicism, for example. Gray went so far as to take the vows of priesthood. Raffalovich converted Wilde's illustrator Aubrey Beardsley to Catholicism. Even Wilde ultimately converted to Catholicism.

Max Nordau, whose treatise *Degeneration* made best seller lists in England in the wake of Wilde's prosecution, unmasked what he called "neo-Catholicism" as the "most distinctive stigmata of the degenerate," identifying the Catholic church as a kind of closet.

Certain of Wilde's contemporaries retreated to more secular sanctuaries, such as the gay colony forming on the island of Capri off the coast of Italy. Others (Wilde's lover Alfred Lord Douglas, for instance) sought the relative tolerance of France, where homosexuality was not illegal.

Constructing Lesbian Closets

In 1918, the English courts again participated in a campaign against Wilde (that is, homosexuality) and again participated in the construction of a closet, this one designed for lesbians. The Billing trial of 1918, which banned a production of Wilde's play *Salomé*, introduced the tabloid-reading public to the phenomenon of lesbian sexual activity for the first time.

Three years later, in 1921, when English anti-homosexual laws were reworded to include lesbianism, the amendment passed the House of Commons, but not the House of Lords, where Lord Desart reasoned, "You are going to tell the whole world that there is such an offence, to bring it to the notice of women who have never heard of it, never thought of it, never dreamed of it. I think that is a very great mischief."

Later in the decade, in 1928, censorship proceedings (again in the English courts) against Radclyffe Hall's lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* mobilized support in homophile communities on both sides of the channel and again moved the subject of lesbianism into the headlines.

The effect of this exposure in the press was analogous to that of the earlier Wilde scandal; it fostered greater solidarity among lesbians and gay men (whatever the internal divisions within specific communities) *vis-à-vis* the "outside" world and made lesbianism (like it or not) an axis of social--that is to say public--identity for women. A new closet, a lesbian closet, took shape as a reactive formation to this exposure.

The Eulenburg-von Moltke Scandal

England, periodically animated by homophobic zeal, was far from unique in this respect. In turn-of-the-twentieth-century Germany, for example, a scandal of major proportions implicated high-ranking homosexual diplomats and officers in Kaiser Wilhelm's service (the Philipp zu Eulenburg and Kuno von Moltke scandal). The Eulenburg-Von Moltke affair rigidified enforcement of legislation already on the books in Germany, Paragraph 175, which made anal intercourse a crime.

In contrast to the patterns of response to Wilde's trials among London's gay dandy-aesthetes, homosexuals in Germany met this wave of repression with organized resistance, mounting the first campaigns for homosexual rights. In the midst of this campaign, one activist, Adlof Brand, exposed a leader of the opposition as secretly homosexual, thus presaging the "outing" tactics of the post-Stonewall era.

Territorial Closets

Berlin's reputation as a scene of activism enhanced the city's appeal to homosexuals internationally, and the homosexual expatriate colony there expanded to rival that of Paris.

Urban centers like Paris and Berlin, while they could be described as "territorial closets," contributed to the visibility as well as the invisibility of homosexual refugees, while fostering bonds that were cultural as well as sexual. Urban institutions such as cabarets, after hours clubs, bath houses, salons, and theaters rallied individual homosexuals from the provinces and abroad, far from the admonishing eyes of their families, into identifiable communities.

If the closet has served to institutionalize homosexuality as shameful and inferior *vis-à-vis* the legitimate heterosexual culture, it has also provided a space of possibility for subversive sexual and political acts. The closet's unstable character, its reversibility, its shifting temporal and territorial boundaries, make it a figure of both oppression and resistance.

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About the Author

Tirza True Latimer earned her Ph.D. in art history at Stanford University. She has published work from a lesbian feminist perspective on a range of topics in the fields of art history and criticism, the decorative arts, and performance. Latimer lectures in art history, feminist studies, and gender studies at various San Francisco Bay Area institutions. She is currently guest-curating an exhibition on Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore for the

Berkeley Art Museum and working on a book entitled "Looking Like a Lesbian: The Sexual Politics of Portraiture in Paris between the Wars."