



The closet and the classroom; strategies of heterosexual discourse

Ray Misson

To cite this article: Ray Misson (1999) The closet and the classroom; strategies of heterosexual discourse, *Critical Studies in Education*, 40:2, 75-88, DOI: [10.1080/17508489909556335](https://doi.org/10.1080/17508489909556335)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508489909556335>



Published online: 26 Jan 2010.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 44



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

The Closet and the Classroom; Strategies of Heterosexist Discourse

Ray Misson

The ways in which intolerance such as heterosexism and homophobia works are in some ways very obvious. The attitudes it generates draw on very obvious images of 'the other' and can readily be analysed in these terms. Less obvious are the discursive strategies of intolerance, the ways in which certain things are kept in silence, certain kinds of knowledge are kept at bay. It will be no news to anyone that the discourse of intolerance is illogical and contradictory, but it is worth considering closely some of the strategies of illogicality deployed to sustain the intolerant position.

The convergence of 'knowledge', 'silence', and the interest in illogical discursive strategies in the previous paragraph, particularly in the context of heterosexism, will be a clear signal to those who know her writings that I am going to draw here on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Sedgwick works largely in a poststructuralist framework, drawing especially on the work of Foucault, hence her particular emphasis on knowledge and its relation to power. Early in her seminal book, *Epistemology of the Closet*, she quotes Foucault:

There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things... There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.¹

Sedgwick makes enormously productive use of two related aspects of this: one is the notion that 'saying' and 'silence' are not in binary opposition but divide the field between them: what cannot be or is not said is as much a central part of the discourse as what can be said. The second is dependent on the insight that 'there is not one but many silences': the kind of silence operating within a particular discourse is fundamentally different from the silence operating in another. If we want to understand a discourse and how it is operating, we need not simply to notice that certain things are not talked about, but to look at the kind of silence, the nature of silence that is there.

Sedgwick takes these notions up in relation to another of Foucault's central terms, 'knowledge', which she sets up against 'ignorance'. She suggests that ignorance - blind stupidity but also the will not to know - structures knowledge (just as silence structures speech), is also multifarious in its shapes, and also needs to be paid attention

1. Cited in E.K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley, 1990, p. 3.

to in considering the nature of any particular knowledge. She also, taking up implicitly that central Foucauldian notion of the power-knowledge nexus, registers the power of ignorance, how ignorance can set the terms:

Knowledge, after all, is not itself power, although it is the magnetic field of power. Ignorance and opacity collude or compete with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy, desires, goods, meanings, persons. If M. Mitterand knows English but Mr Reagan lacks - as he did lack - French, it is the urbane M. Mitterand who must negotiate in an acquired tongue, the ignorant Mr Reagan who may dilate in his native one.²

What is significant here, and in the conceptualisation of silence, is that silence and ignorance are not seen simply as absences or repressions, but rather as forces that themselves actively work to construct the field. Speech and knowledge are not seen as the 'natural' state, silence and ignorance as the deviation, but within a discourse, the particular ignorances and silences demanded by the discourse are powerfully, constructively/destructively at work.

Thus we have the two sets of complementary terms:

speech silence

knowledge ignorance

the terms in each pair being totally bound up with each other in mutual multiple definition. Beyond that, the two pairs are themselves in inevitable, interdependent relationship: knowledge/ignorance being dependent on speech/silence for its workings; speech/silence determining what is known/not known. It is clear why Sedgwick calls her book *Epistemology of the Closet*, epistemology having to do with knowledge and ignorance, the notion of 'the closet' hingeing on speech and silence.

Using this framework, I want to examine the talk and writing of some students in senior English classes on the subject of homosexuality. The data comes from a project, undertaken towards the end of 1995, the aim of which was to look at the ways in which students in senior English classes constructed their notion of homosexuality. I went back to the data again recently for another purpose and was struck by how this aspect of Sedgwick's work illuminated certain elements of it.

The research design for the project was simple. It worked with the scenario-based writing task that students had to do in the Year 12 English examination in Victoria. In this task, at that time, students were given texts relating to a developing situation - usually some issue of public concern - and then they were given a choice of possible writing tasks, that more or less asked them to produce the next text in the

2. *ibid.*, p. 4.

sequence. The scenario for this particular task was about a large rural city called Callington, where the city's administrator had introduced a regulation prohibiting discrimination in terms of sexuality, and had put money behind an advertising campaign to promote it. A range of attitudes were given in the form of a talkback radio show. Then, we were told, a rumour started that the administrator, Leigh Shannon, was herself lesbian. She wrote a letter denying this. The students had a choice of three tasks, a reflective essay commenting on the public reaction, a newspaper feature article on the issues involved, or writing a letter to Leigh Shannon either supporting or rejecting the regulation.

There were three schools involved (pseudonyms are, of course, being used here):

a. Bayview Secondary College

Bayview Secondary College is an inner suburban school to the south-east of Melbourne. It is smaller than either of the other schools, and in fact has a dwindling population due to demographic shifts. To deal with this, it has diversified its offerings and is a very dynamic school with a diverse student population.

b. Green Valley Secondary College

Green Valley Secondary College is a large northern suburban school in a reasonably affluent middle class area. The school clearly prides itself both on its academic standards, and on providing a great deal of support for the students. The students are largely from English-speaking backgrounds.

c. St Michael's College

St Michael's College is a large senior (Years 11 and 12 only) Catholic college in the western suburbs. It draws on various feeder schools in the district. The area is not an affluent one, being largely industrial, and there is considerable youth unemployment. There are a large number of language-background-other-than-English students in the school, although there were no students taking VCE English (ESL) in the class with whom the research was conducted, since the size of the school population allows for there to be separate English as a Second Language classes.

All three schools were coeducational. There were 20-25 students in each class involved in the study.

I went into the classes and talked about the writing task in general: this was, in a sense, the pay-off to the schools because I was Chief Examiner for VCE English at the time. The students did the task in their next class, administered by the classroom teacher. I marked it, and then went back to talk about it with them, taping the class. The data consists of the essays produced by the students, and transcriptions of the

tapes of the subsequent classroom discussions. The students, as we will see, usually took on an 'adult' persona in the writing task, often that of the concerned parent. In the extracts from the students' writing here, I have left errors of spelling and syntax uncorrected.

In the material from the research project, the notion of the closet seems never to be far away. What the research intervention did was, in fact, bring to speech what is normally left silent in the classroom (and outside it), and an uneasiness with that is often apparent, an uneasiness that manifests itself both as an unwillingness to talk and engage at times, but also, in the discussions, quite heated arguments when attitudes are allowed articulation.

Strongly one often finds manifested the demand for silence, the demand not to know. There is the drive to keep homosexuality - the unspoken, the unknown - out of the field of consciousness, the demand that the silence and ignorance that is structuring the field not be brought to articulation and knowledge. Sometimes this is in an extraordinarily naked, even violent form.

Most of the material I will look at here centres around the notion of homosexuality and children. I confess I was surprised, although I probably should not have been, that the material the strongest anti-homosexual attitudes took up and built on was to do with children and the family. Even in generally pro-homosexual pieces, there was often an uneasiness about the conjunction of homosexuals and children, and in the class discussions, it was the subject that generated most argument. I suspect that the concern about children is the most acceptable face of homophobia, and that's why it dominated so much (because, after all, these were serious Year 12 students doing an essay that was going to be marked by the Chief Examiner).

It is also true that the nature of the scenario, since it was about employment through a council, did throw emphasis on childcare workers, although this was deliberately underplayed. The concern, however, was taken up with a vigour that in some cases was truly alarming:

Your campaign, your regulation stands against everything we, as concerned parents try to teach our children. I believe that I, as a parent have the right to decide what is the best for my children, not you. To think, you are proposing to allow homosexuals to be treated as normal civilised human beings when they go against all our sexual principals. According to your regulation, you believe that these people, these "Friecks" to be given positions of responsibility with in our community. I don't know about you Ms Shannon, but I would never allow my children to attend any institution or public engagements were they come in contact with a homosexual or lesbian. To think, you are allowing, proposing that homosexuals and lesbians be permitted to look after our children in schools, were our children could be easily persuaded to such activities wich involve homosexual or lesbian activity, and have the risk of comming home one day and announcing to me that they have aids.

(St Michael's, Student 5)

This is a rather extreme example, and indeed can stand as something of a compendium of homophobic attitudes - moral outrage posing as moral right, 'normal civilised human beings' opposed to 'Friecks', and that remarkable spiral in the last sentence from exposure to the gay or lesbian teacher to paedophilia to AIDS. This is far more than demanding the closet, it is demanding the ghetto, and so in that aspect is atypical, but in its extreme way it shows the drive to distance homosexuality, keep it at bay from impinging on the 'normal' consciousness.

The drive to silence and to ignorance - to not knowing - is strong. In the following exchange we were talking about generational differences:³

St M Oh, my old man, he doesn't really like 'em, sees them on TV with...just walks out ...you know... He can't stand them.

RM He can't stand them. Why not?

St M They're fags!

(General laughter)

RM What more can you say?!

(St Michael's)

The image of the father walking out of the room to dismiss the unwelcome impinging of homosexuality on his consciousness is a strong image of the desire for ignorance, and the son's assertion that these people's very existence is enough to explain that shows there isn't a lot of generational difference in this case. The homophobic students generally were not interested in defining what was wrong with homosexuals in the discussion, just in asserting how awful they were. In the argumentative mode of the written responses to the task, there was at least an implicit requirement that the heterosexual students should attempt to be rational and justify their attitude towards homosexuality, which they did by deploying various negative stereotypes and myths, grist to the mill of ignorance. However in the discussion, although there was some of this kind of argument, the sheer assertion of ignorant attitude dominated and it was as if it did not need justification. The ignorance became knowledge. My comment at

3. The conventions of transcription used are:

St M = Male Student

St F = Female Student

RM = the author

T = Teacher

When the same student speaks a number of times within a sequence, this is noted by identifying the student numerically (e.g. St M1).

the end of the sequence – ‘What more can you say?!’ - is interesting in relation to this and to the notion of speech and silence, even though I said it good-humouredly as a kind of joining in the comic moment. What more can you say at times like that? There are a number of occasions, as you will see, when I am more or less reduced to silence, which is, of course, the point of the discursive strategies.

There is a difference between this and the first text we looked at in that in this case, rather than the demand that gays and lesbians stay segregated, we have active rejection of exposure to the knowledge of homosexuality, although the basic drive is still to separatism, the only tolerable/safe state being ignorance of gay existence. It is not just that queer people ought to be silenced, but that any reminder of their existence is to be avoided.

One of the most telling exchanges in regard to this was when I asked what most of the class at St Michael's seemed to think was a stupid question:

RM You said that you felt that attitudes were changing on this. All of you, do you feel that you have...you have a different attitude than your parents on the question of homosexuality?

(General chorus of responses.)

RM Sorry, what?

SF We don't really talk about it.

RM You don't really talk about it?

(Various comments and laughter.)

RM Sorry. What's that ?

St M You don't really sit down at the table and bring up descriptions of...bring up homosexuals!

(Chorus of laughter and comments in agreement.)

(St Michael's)

Homosexuality is obviously enough to put you off your dinner! It was a reminder of how thoroughly invisible homosexuality is in these families, so much naturally felt to exist in the realm of silence and the unknown that the idea of talking about it as a family is comical. Some of the most significant moments in the class discussions are marked by the students bursting into laughter, such as this one or at the statement ‘They're fags!’ in the previous exchange. It is always hard to articulate the impulse behind such laughter, to ‘read’ its meaning, but it is often a sign that the boundaries of

silence/ignorance were in danger of being transgressed but have been reaffirmed. It is an assertion of 'normality'. A number of times in the discussions, one gets, as in these examples, what one might call the 'Look, let's get real, it's homosexuals we're talking about here!' moment in which the heterosexual/heterosexist norm is asserted in an exclamation, and almost invariably it is followed by laughter. We will see it again in later sequences from the transcripts when homosexuals as parents are being discussed. It is enough for someone to exclaim 'two mothers!' or 'two fathers!' for laughter to come, even though the tide of the argument is flowing against such heterosexism.

You can see something of the same incredulity about talking in the following exchange as in the previous one:

St M Yeah, you were saying before about kids coming into the argument and stuff about homosexuality and that sort of stuff. What normal sane parent involves their kid in that conversation, about this sort of stuff, and says, yeah, it's all right that they're gay and stuff like that?

St F The same parent we've all got!

St M What type of person goes up to this child, and says, "Look, do you want to be gay? Be gay!"

(Chorus of inaudible individual responses)

(St Michael's)

As well as the student asserting the normality of silence, he is also implicitly contesting a discourse of tolerance and acceptance that would bring homosexuality into the realm of the discussible. What was interesting in a number of the written pieces was this unresolved tension between an awareness that tolerance might be expected and an abhorrence at the notion that homosexuality might be brought into the field of consciousness:

I'm sorry but I disagree, our children are our children and if your've been around kids you know they aren't stupid they know whats going on around them. And they also look up to the elders, they show respect and everything that person has, personality wise washes off onto the children. Children are so easily influenced and this makes them very susceptible in thinking it's OK. Why not teach them to respect lesbian's and gays but let's not make up their minds for them by mixing them with these people.

The parents try and bring up their kids with the right values. We tell them what's normal and OK. and what's not right. We can tolerate people like that but we can't say to the kids that it's normal. It's like playing with their minds. This publicity campaign isn't needed in our kids' playground or childcare facilities...

Who knows what effect this would have on them in later years if we let these type of

people care and teach our children because it's saying that it's OK, but is it? It's not natural. Some sick person started this terrible trend. And it would be our mistake as a community to impose this issue on our kids.

Well thank you for reading this letter and letting me say what I had to say.

(Green Valley, Student 15)

What we see in this piece is the uneasy conflation of a non-discriminatory discourse with rampant heterosexism. The student is working against a background of tolerance, of liberal acceptance that he knows is expected of him as a senior English student, and he twice produces statements that suggest that somehow we should teach kids to be tolerant of lesbian and gay people while not burdening them with any knowledge of their existence.

Tolerance and respect of this kind, of course, can in themselves be another version of the silencing: allow homosexuals the sop of tolerance so that they will just shut up. You can see such a view clearly in this piece:

I believe that all this hassle is insignificant. Why couldn't things be left as they were before? All this does is put more controversy on the issue about homosexuality. I personally have nothing against gay people, as long as they don't harm or affect me in any way.

(St Michael's, Student 12)

This is a fairly obvious example of demanding that homosexuals stay in the closet, but the notion that things would be all right if only homosexuals would keep their sexuality private was fairly widespread, even in pro-homosexual pieces. It was argued that sexual difference was irrelevant, but quite clearly it could not be both irrelevant and visible. The myth of equality could only be maintained as long as homosexuality was not known, as long as it was silent. In such cases, tolerance becomes just another strategy of heterosexism, of repression, to avoid confrontation with knowledge of sexuality. One tolerates or represses as is strategically necessary to keep homosexuality at a distance, to keep ignorance and silence in place.

This brings us back to Sedgwick. The aspect of her achievement that I want to concentrate on is best summed up by David Halperin in *Saint Foucault*:

The great virtue of Sedgwick's analysis is that it delivers lesbians and gay men from the temptation to play what is ultimately a mug's game of refuting the routine slanders and fantasies produced by the discourses of homophobia. The reason it is pointless to refute the lies of homophobia is not that they are difficult or impossible to refute - on the contrary, taken one at a time they are easily falsifiable... - but that refuting them does nothing to impair the strategic functioning of discourses that operate precisely by deploying a series of mutually contradictory premises in such a way that any one of them can be substituted for any other, as different circumstances may require, without

changing the final outcome of the argument.⁴

At a number of points in the data, one can see this happening very clearly indeed.

At both St Michael's and Green Valley, the issue of the homosexual as parent came up, and this produced some of the strongest reactions. In neither case did I raise it, but it appeared in the context of talking about children. If talking about homosexuals as teachers produced concern, talking about homosexuals as parents produced a surprising degree of passion:

St M It's not fair on the kids either!

(General chorus in agreement.)

St F If the kids will all turn out ...neither... (inaudible) male nor female or whatever.

St M Yeah, but they might not... (inaudible)...they might not know any better.

St M2 But they should be able to adopt I reckon...Yeah, 'cause I mean they're still people anyway. It's just their sexual preferences are different, I mean...

St F And they were born that way.

* * *

T I was just going to, I was interested in why you think it's not fair on the kids... and who agrees?

St M3 Yeah, it's not... Because they're going to cop pressure like when they're older, when they're at school and that... They'll get nothing but bagged then.

St M That's only because our community doesn't accept...

(Chorus of indecipherable individual comments.)

St M3 Yeah, imagine having, say, two mums and lesbians and going to school and that. You'd cop it bad. And not having a dad and that. It just wouldn't be good for the kids.

St M So is that saying ...

St M2 Sorry...

St F If you were that used to it, you wouldn't let it worry you, or take any notice of them because they're...

4. D. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, New York, 1995, pp. 37-38.

St M3 Oh come on, Kelly, it would still affect you. There's no way... (inaudible)

(Chorus of inaudible comments.)

St F How is the child able... supposed to be able to grasp the concept of two mothers when everyone else around them has got a mother and a father?

St F2 Or two fathers, and how is this supposed to not affect them at all? Like, how are they supposed to grow up without any problems, you know?

St M Well, people grow up with one parent.

St F2 Yeah but like you... you...especially little ...as you get older it will be more... you'll understand it more, but as a young child, at kindergarten age you go to kindergarten...(inaudible) see so many mothers and fathers ...and... and two mothers!

(Chorus of laughter, followed by inaudible comments)

RM Sorry... sorry, can...What were you saying?

St F I said well one of them...well really only...sort of...there'll be really only one real mum out of those two.

(Green Valley)

I thought this, on the whole, a fairly healthy exchange because it was clearly bringing into question some deeply-held beliefs. It certainly confirms the strong impression that I had that the population at Green Valley generally saw the world in terms of the heterosexual two-parent nuclear family. It is a long way into the discussion before someone actually makes the point that some 'people grow up with one parent', although, I suppose, fairly clearly not many people in Green Valley do. (The teacher commented when I was talking about this to him later that when there is a divorce, the families tend to move into the inner suburbs.) You will note some of the shifts in argument, and, in particular, those strategic shifts that produce logical incoherence, but sustain the unacceptability of homosexuality. You will note particularly that the child of the homosexual family cannot win. At first, the fear is that they will not know whether they are male or female, and so presumably will be in danger of ending up homosexual themselves, but then they become poor little heterosexual victims who haven't got the proper family support. It's the kind of shift that is characteristic of arguments stemming from prejudice, because, as Sedgwick has argued, in the end they have nothing to do with rationality. What is important is that the attitudes can be deployed as needed to sustain the 'rightness' of the heterosexist position.

The sheer irrationality of the attitudes is at times the most striking thing, and the way in which the irrationality is basically impervious to any kind of critique. The

following exchange comes from St Michael's. I specifically directed a question to one of the boys who had said he did not like homosexuals:

St M1 I'd run (a homosexual) over if he walked across the road.

RM O.K. You'd run him over if he walked across the road. So you in fact would not want your...

St M1 (They're gutless.)

RM ...a kid of yours to have a homosexual as a teacher?

St M1 No, they'll learn filthy habits.

St F (inaudible, but clearly against the statement)

St M1 They will...they will!

(Chorus of comments.)

RM No... No...

St F (inaudible, something about 'walking across the road')

RM Sorry. Can I... can I, I mean, quite seriously ask what kind of habits you think they would learn? I... I...

St M1 What happens if there was something going on in the bedroom and they walk in...and they wanted to know what's going on?

RM But...

St M1 How are they going to teach children the right thing?

St F1 (overlapping) ...at school.

St M1 At school, but when they get home and they see that they've got like two fathers.

(General laughter)

St F1 But we're talking about teachers.

St F2 They don't care (i.e. that they've got two fathers.)

RM No No No. I... I was actually talking about teachers.

St M1 Yeah? So?

RM But... but the children do not see the teachers in bed, usually anyway. What...

St M1 (inaudible)...You never know.

RM What?

St M1 You never know!

RM Right....

(St Michael's)

At which point, I decided it was time to change the topic. The interesting thing, apart from the doggedness with which he asserted his viewpoint - and one does not get the impression on the tape that he is feeling at all challenged by the logic against him - is the shift from discussing the homosexual as teacher to discussing the homosexual as parent, as getting the better of the argument seemed to demand it. This is an excellent example of the strategic incoherence that Sedgwick argues is typical. And it is no accident that I decide yet again, however good-humouredly or ironically, to give up, because... you can't win. It is precisely to put the opponent in that no-win situation that the argumentative strategy works. The result is silence.

The homophobic attitude is basically an empty container into which various arguments can be poured as need demands, and it is so difficult to contest because the arguments are not to be judged logically. The basic attitude is seen as right, and if one argument is not producing the desired effect, then the opposite one will be tried. Homophobia is thus protean and virtually indestructible, at least by reason. This creates a problem for teachers, since logical argument is one of the few tools they have to work with. They can get students to mount the proper arguments against it, but that doesn't necessarily turn around the attitude.⁵

Even in many of the pro-homosexual pieces, one sees the working of discursive strategies that are underpinned by negative views. Binary oppositions are mobilised that might easily flip between positive and negative attitudes. For example, there was a certain amount of anecdotal material about knowing gay people, and how this made a difference. Some of it was obviously made up, and inherently heterosexist:

I to was totally against the idea of gays working beside me, and I was disgusted to think how gays could be looking after my four children. My view was that they would crack on to me and even sexually abuse my children. I thought this until last week, when my

5. See R. Misson, 'What's in it for me?: Teaching against Homophobic Discourse', in *Schooling and Sexualities: Teaching for a Positive Sexuality*, eds. L. Laskey and C. Beavis, Geelong, 1996 and R. Misson, "'Despite all my Rage, I'm still just a Rat in a Cage": The Limits of Critical Literacy', *Fine Print*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1996, pp. 3-9.

brother, whom I am very close to, came out and told me that he was gay. At first I was shocked and disgusted, thinking that he was a dirty, low down AIDS carryer with no morals. But since then I have changed my reasoning, seeing that he is a very caring person, who is I might add, is well respected amongst the community. His workmates will never know who he is, and he has told me that he has no interest in most men.

(Green Valley, Student 9)

So, a gay person is all right as long as they do not tell anyone and do not have any interest in (most) men. In this little narrative, the change of attitude in the writer does not depend on any reconsideration of the nature of homosexuality, but rather on seeing the particular gay person as the exceptional case. The fundamental heterosexism remains unimpaired. This next writer seems to be moving towards a genuine tolerance, but even so, there is the implicit acknowledgment that being gay might normally be considered as a shift away from the good, the gay person again being defined by what he is not:

A good friend of mine became gay last year. He has not always been gay as he had a relationship with another good friend of mine just a couple of years back. I suppose being gay has changed him, but it hasn't made him bad. I reckon the nicest, most caring people are gay.

(Green Valley, Student 4)

Of particular note, in both of these pieces, is that the significant adjective is 'caring'. The common positive representation of the gay man is as a 'feminised' and therefore 'caring' being. This is interesting in terms of the contradictory attitudes that homophobia can inhabit since it can be put up against the fear of homosexual contact with children. The (male) homosexual is inadequately masculine and so a 'caring' person, the 'caringness' being a sign of his inadequacy, and yet he cannot be allowed near children because he will violate the proper codes of care. Thus the male homosexual will either have an excess or a deficit of caring: he will inevitably either care too little (and molest) or too much (and be feminine).⁶

Such binary oppositions are typical of stereotyped images of disadvantaged people. They can be deployed as needed to distance and disadvantage the gay man, mark him as not normal. The feminised image of the gay person as caring actually has two contrary images: the one is of the gay person as child violator as we have here. The other, which actually surfaced nowhere in the data, except implicitly in some talk

6. The reader will have noted the assumption through most of the data that homosexuals are male, in spite of the fact that the scenario (deliberately) drew attention to lesbianism. It suggests how thoroughly silenced lesbianism is. See R. Misson, 'Dangerous Lessons: Sexuality Issues in the English Classroom', *English in Australia*, no. 112, 1995, pp. 25-32.

about the gay lifestyle wrecking the serenity of the suburbs, is the image of the gay person as camp and frivolous and so insensitive to proper feeling.

In much of the material I have been looking at, the classroom intervention has of its nature made the silence speak, brought the ignorance to articulation. It is much more difficult to discern the silence and ignorance within a discourse when they remain silent and unknown. It is, however, necessary to try to discern their shape since they are so fundamental in structuring the discourse and keeping intolerance in place.

One of the hardest things in analysing material like this is not to seem paranoid (or perhaps not to be paranoid). It is in some ways very easy to work with the clearly heterosexual and homophobic texts that are manifesting their negativity, such as have formed the basis of most of the analysis here. You can show the discontinuities, the shifts as they deploy different strategies. You can look at the range of negative images. It is much harder when heterosexism seems implicitly there. Because you are dealing with what is not said, the contours of silence shaped by the limits of what is said or can be said, one can always be accused of reading in what's not there. That too is one of the ways in which the discourses of the closet work, to make the naming of silent homophobia seem unreasonable.

Or am I just being paranoid in saying that?

Bibliography

- Halperin, D, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995.
- Misson, R, 'Dangerous Lessons: Sexuality Issues in the English Classroom', *English in Australia*, no 112, 1995, 25-32.
- Misson, R, "'Despite all my Rage I'm still just a Rat in a Cage": The Limits of Critical Literacy', *Fine Print*. 18(3), 1996a, 3-9.
- Misson, R, 'What's in it for me?: Teaching against Homophobic Discourse', in *Schooling and Sexualities: Teaching for a Positive Sexuality*, eds. L. Laskey and C. Beavis, Geelong, Deakin Centre for Education and Change, 1996b, 117-129.
- Sedgwick, E. K., *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990.