

2021

Towards an Etiology of the Closet: Sexuality Studies “After Sedgwick”

Kazuki Yamada

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Yamada, Kazuki (2021) "Towards an Etiology of the Closet: Sexuality Studies “After Sedgwick”," *Criticism*: Vol. 63: Iss. 4, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol63/iss4/5>

TOWARDS AN ETIOLOGY OF THE CLOSET: SEXUALITY STUDIES “AFTER SEDGWICK”

Kazuki Yamada

A review of *The Book of Minor Perverts: Sexology, Etiology, and the Emergences of Sexuality* by Benjamin Kahan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 242 pp. \$99.00 cloth, \$32.00 paper.

If after the appearance of *The History of Sexuality* (1976) many works in sexuality studies could be reasonably described as “After Foucault,” then Benjamin Kahan’s ambitious work is best described in addition as “After Sedgwick” (115).¹ Self-professed as a “sustained exploration of [Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s] work and thought in order to understand its impact,” *The Book of Minor Perverts* explicitly positions itself as a study that aims to more fully describe, if not cut, the “Gordian Knots” that still remain unresolved and undertheorized in the field of sexuality studies in the wake of Sedgwick’s critical insights in her 1990 *Epistemology of the Closet* (118). Fittingly, Kahan’s central preoccupation in this book is to more thoroughly investigate what Sedgwick herself was hesitant to excavate: the story of the “invention of the homo/hetero binary,” which she almost mockingly called the Great Paradigm Shift (116). For Kahan, the Great Paradigm Shift is a narrative of sexual etiology that posits the diachronic emergence of a sexual modality where desire has no cause beyond the gender-based object attractions which we are born with. In turn, *The Book of Minor Perverts* earnestly posits that if we hope to more deeply understand the history of the modern sexual etiology of congenital homo/heterosexuality and unravel its full consequences, there is no

more room for Sedgwick's hesitation in being attentive to the alternative sexual etiologies and "thousand aberrant sexualities" that the homo/hetero binary has historically "effaced" (8)—including those suggesting an acquired sexual etiology rather than a "born this way" explanation. Kahan's work instead emphatically urges readers to seek a way forward in what he describes as "historical etiology" amidst a contemporary political landscape where the homo/hetero binary is beginning to come undone (25), and in the process of doing so constructs a compelling foundation for how sexuality studies might proceed long after Sedgwick and Foucault.

The Book of Minor Perverts is composed of seven chapters. Other than the introduction outlining the book's central concerns and methodology and the concluding afterword, each chapter focuses on one specific sexual etiology, balancing discussions of each etiology's technical mechanics with close readings of their manifestations and modifications in a diverse range of literary works (a dynamic Kahan calls "vernacular sexology" after Stephanie Foote). In this sense, Kahan's work very much follows Sedgwick in recognizing the value literary studies offer to historical and critical analyses of sexuality, and simultaneously joins a growing body of recent historical scholarship that is attentive to

fin de siècle sexology's literary character even while the precise relationship between literature and sexology remains somewhat undertheorized.

Readers familiar with the history of sexology will be most comfortable in chapters 1, 2, and 5, even as their arguments and approaches challenge dominant disciplinary, archival, and narrative demarcations. Chapter 1 traces the "uneasy" crystallization of situational homosexuality in the 1930s to earlier etiologies of sexual desire as cyclical and in tune with the seasons (27). By reading sexological theory alongside Thomas Dickinson's *Winter Bound* (1929) and Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934), Kahan explores how early twentieth century sexologists longed and failed to return modern heterosexuality's pathological "constant desire" for the "nostalgic past" of a healthy periodicity synchronized with the rhythms of nature. Kahan traces how, in doing so, an etiological framework was inadvertently created where heterosexuality's constancy became the norm against which the periodic and temporary became characteristic of homosexuality's cause, and heterosexuality was established as the congenital, psychologically rooted "always" to which contemporary discourses insisting on homosexuality's congenital nature aspire (29–30).

Chapter 2 continues this thinking around the relationship of environmental etiologies to the origin of congenital theories of sexuality. Collecting such etiologies of sexual situatedness under the term *anthropologia sexualis* after German sexologist Iwan Bloch (47), Kahan explores through a reading of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) how the "virtual unanimity" of fin de siècle sexologists in viewing climate and geography as critical but ultimately temporary factors in shaping sexually deviant expression and desire gradually shifted to a germ theory model that viewed sexual pathology as an externally originating infection "permanently modify[ing] the subject's constitution" (57). This for Kahan presents a key transition period where the foundation for theorizing sexual *identity* as unchangeably rooted in the body is established, even whilst its etiological mechanism understands the body as open-ended and continuous with its environment to varying degrees.

Chapter 5 similarly places familiar sexological texts alongside literary works by analyzing how alcoholism was inconsistently understood in terms of its role in sexual etiology and sequential logics. Reading well-known sexual scientific works by Magnus Hirschfeld and Iwan Bloch alongside Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947) and Charles

R. Jackson's *The Lost Weekend* (1944), Kahan argues that alcoholism's imagined capacity to simultaneously "induce homosexuality, be simultaneous with it, follow from it, or . . . make one sexually attractive" gestures towards a "weak theory of etiology" where the necessity for a *specific* sexual cause-effect sequentiality is "volitional" and "fictional," thus creating a space where heterosexuality (and indeed any sexuality) does not necessarily come first in any hierarchy or sequence of sexual subjectivity (109–10).

In contrast to these three chapters, chapters 3 and 4 are far more challenging in pushing the boundaries of where a genealogy of sexological etiologies might lead and are consequently sketchier in their argumentation, though nonetheless exciting in pointing out underexplored avenues of research. Chapter 3 attempts to trace a preliminary genealogy of another "ingredient" on which the emergence of modern sexuality depends: the consolidation of a sexual subjectivity along with its necessary objects of desire. Kahan does this by simultaneously making the case for paying attention to *magia sexualis*, a term taken from nineteenth-century American sexual magician Paschal Beverly Randolph, which consists of "magical cadences in the sexual lexicon" suggesting a "unified field" where mystical

elements such as occultism, sorcery, supernaturalism, and witchcraft are intertwined with the articulation of sexual grammars and etiologies (68–69). Tracing the different forms that *magia sexualis* takes throughout Baron Ludwig von Reizenstein's *The Mysteries of New Orleans* (1854–55), George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894), and Paschal Beverly Randolph's own studies on sexual magic, Kahan argues how a magical framework permits the formulation of sexual etiologies without desire nor subject–object distinction (von Reizenstein), without object nor subject but with desire in the form of a general aim (du Maurier), and finally to a form where sexual magic and power become a function not of any external force but of personal will and agency, marking the formulation of one of the earliest theories of sexual subjectivity (Randolph). As Kahan himself states, a “much fuller study” remains to be done on the role of magic and mysticism in sexological thinking (83), and it is yet to be established whether *magia sexualis* has played a “formidable role in forging the grammars of sexual attraction and the formation of sexual subjectivity,” as he suggests (69). Nonetheless, the chapter offers a helpful blueprint towards further research in positing *magia sexualis* as an important framework within which alternative sexual etiologies beyond

congenital homo/heterosexuality could be formulated.

Chapter 4 treads similarly underexplored territory in reading the texts of Fordist industrialization for theories of sexual etiology. Here, Kahan juxtaposes Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and his other writings on industrialization with Antonio Gramsci's analyses of the Ford Motor Company's Sociological Department to unpack how the standardizing forces of industrialized productivity in the United States might also extend to fix sexual-object choice as the primary and standard mode of sexuality. In doing so, Kahan argues for paying greater attention to the significance of reading productivity and reproductivity within the same “discursive” and “phenomenological” space driven by the “constitutive force of capital” (86), and invites us to seek in historical landscapes and symbols of nonindustrialized “small town desire” alternative “modalit[ies] for escaping sexual standardization” and thus alternative sexual etiologies outside the system of capitalism (90–92). This, too, gestures towards areas for further exploration in ways that are attentive to economic systems and political ideologies, as well as sensitive to differences between the North American and European context in seeking a fuller historical genealogy of sexual etiology.

Taken as a whole, there are many good things to say about Kahan's ambitious new work, and the book's afterword summarizes many of the powerful interventions made possible by Kahan's historical etiological approach. One of the most significant stems from Kahan's efforts to recover the kaleidoscope of "minor" sexual etiologies that circulated prior to the congealment of congenital homo/heterosexuality. By unpacking the myriad alternative narratives of sexuality's origins and causalities historically obscured (but never entirely replaced) by the rising dominance of "the gender of object choice as *the* dimension" by which sexuality is defined (3), *The Book of Minor Perverts* successfully stresses the importance of disaggregating the notion of sexual congenitality (and indeed, sexual-object choice and subjectivity, as well as sexual aim and various etiologies of sexual acquisition) from sexuality itself in a historical sense. That is, by formulating an approach through which the different "ingredients" of sexuality can be understood to separately and repeatedly emerge in different contexts and diverse historical periods (124), Kahan creates a way forward that understands sexualities as particular constellations and configurations of these sexual components beyond merely the difference between sexuality and gender. As a consequence, the historiographic claim

that homosexuality emerged in the eighteenth century can be brought into productive dialogue with the counter claim that it only emerged in the nineteenth century. For Kahan, "the ingredients of homosexuality are all there [in the eighteenth century] . . . they just haven't been baked together" into the particular arrangement that are the makings of modern sexual identity, which requires the notion of sexual congenitality as a precondition, yet is not solely constituted by it (124). Beyond historiography, understanding the history of sexuality in this framework thus also illuminates a way forward in imagining and more clearly understanding what sexuality is and will become, as acquired sexual etiologies return to contemporary cultural consciousness and the entanglements of sexual-object choice with other identity categories beyond gender such as age, class, and race become more acutely visible.

But as characteristic of a work written "After Sedgwick," *The Book of Minor Perverts* is just as self-aware of its own preliminary status as *Epistemology of the Closet* was. Like Sedgwick, Kahan is acutely cognizant of the many ways that "we can't know in advance" (115): his book has no conclusion, simply an afterword, and the revised narrative of the Great Paradigm Shift that closes his entire work (limited as it is to men in the context of the United States) is a "first draft" (131).

Furthermore, while Kahan intends to “sidestep” criticisms of etiology’s potentially homophobic and “gay-genocidal nexuses of thought,” he does not offer fuller reassurances to those who will not (or perhaps even cannot) take him at his word that his etiologies will remain “weak” (10). “We can’t know in advance.” Indeed, Kahan’s “account of the emergence of sexuality is necessarily provisional, nontotalizing, approximate, and open to adjustment and change” (2), and his work is best viewed as an encouragement for readers to embark on a similar recovery of alternative modalities of sexual desire that tantalizingly point towards “the utopian possibility” of a truly queer sexuality “without hierarchy, sequence, or priority” even as risks and dangers lurk behind such a quest (114). Kahan is by no means the last word—he does not *want* to be the last word—on the historical etiologies of sexuality and sexology in their broadest conceptualizations, but what is certain at this point is that his exciting work will find fruitful and inspired readership amongst many scholars across sexuality studies, the history of sexuality, queer theory, literary studies, and the medical humanities widely defined.

Kazuki Yamada is a PhD candidate at the University of Exeter (UK) and the University of Queensland (Australia). His doctoral thesis traces the genealogy of later life sexuality in the sciences of sex and ageing

across Europe and the United States (ca. 1850–1980).

NOTE

1. Lisa, Downing, ed., *After Foucault: Culture, Theory, and Criticism in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).