

Three Case Studies in the Epistemology of the Gay Male Closet in Popular Music

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Queerness has become an established discourse in the academic study of popular music; however, the vagueness of the term “queer” has been both a strength and a weakness. If according to José Esteban Muñoz “queer” is a term that is “more expansive and including of various structures of feeling and habits of being that the relative restrictive categories of gay and lesbian identities are incapable of catching” (115), the term’s loose(ning) relations to sexuality towards that of a “critical” position has returned rather dissatisfying analyses; for instance, Stan Hawkins’s understanding of queer as “resistance” (23), as framed by “the different, the original, and the quirky” (15) and departing “from the gender norm” (111) led to the interpretation of Justin Timberlake’s execution of beatboxing, a widely popular practice in hip hop, as “camp” (152); while his singing in falsetto, a common type of vocal phonation for male soul and R’n’B singers, is said to “queer his body” (154). In these examples a musical performance of blackness is erased and paradoxically naturalised by queering it. It is therefore evident that a much more nuanced and critical approach is needed when discussing queerness in popular music.

The understanding of the term “queer” has been shaped overwhelmingly by the work of Judith Butler, which ensconced its meaning in the notion of purposeful “deviation from normalcy” (*Bodies* 176) through the “subversive and parodic redeployment of power” (*Trouble* 170); however, in *Homos* Leo Bersani lamented that “resignification, redeployment, or hyperbolic miming” are mimetic activities that are “too closely imbricated in the norms they continue” (51). In particular Bersani claimed that “male homosexuality has always manifested itself socially as a highly specific blend of conformism and transgression” (66) and that “even in coming out we have managed to hide ourselves” (67).

Bersani’s seemingly antithetical understanding of male homosexuality, albeit pointing to a dubious deliberate and conscious agency in pursuing the activities of hiding and coming out, resonates with the notion of the closet formulated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Indeed, Kosofsky Sedgwick described the closet as “the defining structure for gay oppression” (71), manifesting its control in what she saw as the damaging contradictions of the compromised metaphor of being “in” or “out” of the closet. In fact, for Kosofsky Sedgwick being out of the closet, “coming out,” was not necessarily the “salvational epistemologic certainty” to be unproblematically counterposed to the “very equivocal” privacy afforded by the closet (71). Indeed, both the closet and coming out in Kosofsky Sedgwick’s account are the “gravest and most magnetic...figures” (71) in which are condensed the enabling but dangerous incoherence of some of the most fundamental “relations by which we know” (3) such as secrecy and disclosure, silence and speech, knowledge and ignorance, private and public, masculine and feminine, natural and artificial, active and passive, presence and absence and so on and so forth.

These mappings articulate what Kosofsky Sedgwick calls “pseudo-oppositions:” unstable dichotomies which have become structured – indeed fractured – by what she believed to be a “chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century” (1). For instance, with regards to silence, she quotes the Foucault of *The History of Sexuality* saying that

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 (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1).

Therefore, from this perspective closetedness is “a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularly by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it” (3).

It is in the unfolding of these performances that the epistemological possibilities of the closet as a theoretical framework are realised. Indeed, in Kosofsky Sedgwick’s discussion the closet opens up a “performative space of contradiction” (48) where monolithic identities upon which fragile oppositions are predicated can be decon-

structed; Kosofsky Sedgwick engages in such deconstructions in her own book *Epistemology of the Closet*, which concentrates on readings of literary fiction.

The present analysis will aim to gloss over the articulation of male homosexuality in popular music by following Kosofsky Sedgwick's model of the closet by reading against the grain three popular music "texts" (including lyrics, music, and visual elements), chosen for their particular suitability to be thought *with* the closet. These texts will be interpreted mainly through the pairings of private and public, secrecy and disclosure, silence and speech, and presence and absence. The discussion will focus on specific moments in the three case studies: the bridge (03'04–03'33") in Steve Grand's "All American Boy" (2013), the outro (3'35"–04'01") in Perfume Genius's "Gay Angels" (2007), and the first instrumental break (1'02"–1'17") in Arca's "Reverie" (2017).

There are several ways in which the closet marks the pairings of private and public, secrecy and disclosure, silence and speech, and presence and absence in these excerpts. To begin with, in the visual narrative of "All American Boy" the lake presents all the characteristics of the gay closet: a place that is secluded and shrouded from sight, but at the same time still accessible to others, therefore of precarious privacy. In the fragile secrecy afforded by this closet some revealing disclosures are made, both physical – with undressing – and emotional, for instance as expressed by the lyrics "you can have my heart, my soul, and my body," as well as the avowal of desire represented by the kiss. Nonetheless such revelations are ambivalent as in the visual narrative they are construed as unfolding in the silence of the tacit (mis)understanding of the closet. Furthermore, their consequence is of dubious reward; indeed, such disclosures become invalidated by the force of the disappointment that follows them, which is compounded by the bathetic return to the chorus. In the economy of a popular song the return to the chorus after the bridge is usually a moment of satisfaction and gratification because it marks the reoccurrence of familiar material, especially after the contrasting musical and lyrical ideas introduced in the bridge. However, although expectations for such a return are raised, for instance by creating tension with the rising quasi-chromatic modulations from the dominant chord of C# to F major, and the addition of four bars of silence following the kiss, which heightens further the suspense, when the chorus appears, it does so in an altered form with the first four bars presenting a pared down instrumental arrangement with only an acoustic guitar, and a much lower intensity in the vocal performance, which, combined with the portrayal of rejection in the visual narrative, magnify the sense of disappointment. The power of this anti-climactic chorus is such that its lyrics, "be my American boy," are revealed further to be not an invitation to be uttered to another, but rather a desperate plea to be spoken in the silence of one's closet.

It is interesting to note that in the album version of the song, in place of the four bars of silence there is instead an instrumental section of equal length featuring a guitar solo in the tonic key. The guitar solo could easily be taken to represent a symbol of erotic climax, because of the traditional phallicism in the approach to the guitar, which was already noted in Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie's 1978 article "Rock and Sexuality." In this context the guitar solo changes the meaning of the altered chorus into a sort of post-coital pause, nevertheless its presence does not point to the overcoming of the closet's impositions, as the lyrics in the chorus do not suggest a realisation of the desire expressed in them. In this sense the guitar solo is cast rather as the climax of an onanistic fantasy than the physical fulfilment of desire. Therefore, the presence and absence of the guitar solo and of silence in the two versions of the song, their interchangeability, demonstrate the discursivity of the logics of the closet, permeating narratives and proving the closet's resilience in negotiating "transgressions," thus rendering both the guitar solo and the silence not as moments of rupture but rather an integral part of its workings.

Such logics are also evident in "Gay Angels." Here we can construe a more traditional representation of the closet as a private enclosed room. Nonetheless such privacy suggests no sense of safety, but rather there are several elements that characterise this space as claustrophobic. Indeed, the awkward movements of the central figure, which are a result of slowed down and reversed visual dynamics, the pace of the harmonic rhythm, which consists of sustained chords that have a drone-like quality, the narrow range of the vocal melody, which does not exceed the interval of a perfect fourth all contribute to the articulation of a deep sense of oppression.

Furthermore, what Serge Lacasse would term the "phonographic staging of the voice" creates an experience of proximity that is not predicated on positive notions of intimacy, but which rather feels too close for comfort. This is accomplished by foregrounding the grain of the voice as well as microphone noises by increasing the ratio between the dynamic level (the perceived loudness level in the mix) and its performance intensity (the level at which it was performed during recording) thus capturing and amplifying inhalations and exhalations – often distorted – with little compression.

The closet in "Gay Angels" is also the place where dressing and undressing happens, however these actions complicate the relationship between secrecy and disclosure, because here undressing both reveals and conceals further: when a body suit is taken off, there is another one beneath it, but removing the first body suit is really

putting it on, as the video is played backwards. Furthermore, such representations of the unstable (pseudo)opposition between secrecy and disclosure in the closet intersect in complex ways with the relation between silence and speech in the vocal performance. First of all, there is no synching and therefore no immediate connection between the central figure and the voice heard. Any association of the latter as originating from the former may be because of the conventions and expectations of a music video more than any explicitly drawn bond, thus construing a figure that is both silent and not. In addition, the intelligibility of the sung text is troubled, being situated in a liminal domain between verbal and vocal utterance, between a lexical expression and what Serge Lacasse, after Fernando Poyatos, has called “alternants” (230). Alternants are vocal sounds that occur on their own, but which are nonetheless highly codified in culture. For instance, the humming in the chorus is a straightforward example of this kind of vocal effect, but this is framed by a melodic phrase that, like in the verse, is strongly characterised by adjunct descending motion. Both expressions could be thought of as performing a lament, but what is being lamented here?

The absence of clear semantic meaning in the singing is contrasted by the presence of text as titles on the image, seemingly telling the story of a coming out (“Gay angels call, and they are singing, we love you exactly the way that you are”), but whose possible meanings lead to further uncertainty. Indeed, when a resolution in the harmony is achieved after the last chorus, by a landing in the vocal melody on the tonic E, this is quickly combined with the repetition of the interjection/alternant “shhh” and the utterance “it’s ok” (also appearing as a title), combined with improvised notes on the piano and note clusters, whose underpinnings render these expressions far from reassuring. The absence of a clear resolution is exacerbated by the final silent section where the dressing/undressing is concluded/initiated.

There are further iterations of the closet in “Reverie,” where the title suggests its constitution as the imaginary place of one’s own fantasies, a sort of “internal” closet whose fictional nature is performed here by the explicit artificiality of the setting (thus collapsing another pairing – the natural/artificial); for instance, we glimpse a studio light on the ceiling, and we see the upper edge of a set wall. Such artificiality also functions as an estrangement technique, making evident the staged and public nature of this exercise – therefore undermining the privacy of this reverie/closet.

In addition, the security afforded by such a place is assailable as dreams can turn into nightmares. Indeed, a crucial moment in the articulation of the closet’s relations in this text is the goring perpetrated by what appears to be a bull’s horn. After this event, the camera-framing concentrates specifically on the matador’s exposed buttocks whence blood trickles: the implication here is that the horn has pierced through their rectum. This can be interpreted as an allegory for anal intercourse, whose act, although concealed through displacement, can also be considered to be quite obvious, perhaps because of the common knowledge about the sexual significance of oneritic symbolism since Freud’s work.

This interpretation is further encouraged by the utterance of the imperative “ábreme” while the goring is taking place. Indeed, this verb in English means “open me” or “open for me” but in Spanish it has strong sexual connotations, and in particular in this context it points to the expression of desire for (violent) anal intercourse, a desire that is at the node of another pairing: active (the form of the verb), and passive (the construction of the subject as the object of the action). The seemingly paradoxical indirect immediacy of such utterance is further complicated by its phonographic staging; indeed, its semantic clarity is eroded by the fracturing and distortion of this word performed by the autosonic repetition of its first syllable, which is sampled and looped as well as preceded by a delay effect on a synth note of the same rhythm and pitch (the dominant note of B) of the vocal sample, thus blurring further the transparency of this expression. The presence/absence of this utterance is further accomplished by its farther placement in the mix through the manipulation of its reverberation, dynamic level, and equalization as well as its more tenuous synching. This renders this speech act into a sort of disembodied quasi-alternant groan of pleasure while accompanying a moment of suffering and pain, ultimately leading to a death, in what can be considered as the articulation of a further (false) dichotomy – that of pleasure and pain, Eros and Thanatos.

It seems apparent from these brief analyses that the closet as understood by Kosofsky-Sedgwick provides a heuristically powerful, productive, and significant framework whose calibration and flexibility-in-conjugation permits a reading that captures the complexities in the representations of male homosexuality in popular music.

However, as noted by Kosofsky Sedgwick there is a risk in making salient the continuity and centrality of the closet in the discussion of male homosexuality, by presenting, if only by default, as inevitable and or somehow valuable “its exactions, its deformations, its disempowerment, and sheer pain” (68). Kosofsky Sedgwick’s perceptive analysis of the double bind in her own critical approach poses a further series of contradictions structured by the closet, between empowerment and disempowerment, progress and regress, positive and negative. Neverthe-

less, as stated by Kosofsky Sedgwick in 1990 and still true thirty years later, the closet “for many gay people...is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence” (Kosovsky-Sedgwick 1990: 68). It would be a mistake not to acknowledge such a presence, to wish it away, to hide it behind dogmatically affirmative notions such as “queer,” however valuable a function these can serve at times. Indeed the closet may be an obvious presence, but as noted by Kosofsky Sedgwick, “it’s only by being shameless about risking the obvious that we happen in the vicinity of the transformative” (22).

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