Queer Theory and the Creation of Contextual Subject Access Tools for Gay and Lesbian Communities

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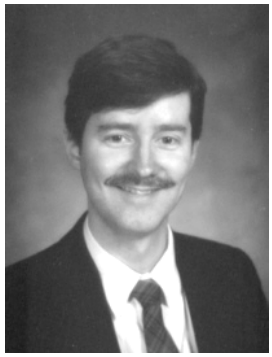

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ABSTRACT: Knowledge organization research has come to question the theoretical distinction between "aboutness" (a document's innate content) and "meaning" (the use to which a document is put). This distinction has relevance beyond Information Studies, particularly in relation to homosexual concerns. Literary criticism, in particular, frequently addresses the question: when is a work "about" homosexuality? This paper explores this literary debate and its implications for the design of subject access systems for gay and lesbian communities. By examining the literary criticism of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, particularly in relation to the theories of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), this paper exposes three tensions that designers of gay and lesbian classifications and vocabularies can expect to face. First is a tension between essentialist and constructivist views of homosexuality, which will affect the choice of terms, categories, and references. Second is a tension between minoritizing and universalizing perspectives on homosexuality. Third is a redefined distinction between aboutness and meaning, in which aboutness refers not to stable document content, but to the system designer's inescapable social and ideological perspectives. Designers of subject access systems can therefore expect to work in a context of intense scrutiny and persistent controversy.

Introduction

The problem of providing subject access to documents has attracted considerable scrutiny in the field of Information Studies, both from practitioners trying to create and implement efficient access tools and from theorists trying to articulate the conceptual foundations upon which these tools rest. Two problems, in particular, have challenged our expertise in recent years. First, we have come to realize that determining the subject content of a document is an inherently subjective process, which is difficult, if not impossible, to replicate from one indexer to another. Second, we have come to realize that tools purporting to provide "universal" access, such as *Dewey Decimal Classification*, *Library of Congress Classification* and the *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, provide inadequate access to marginalized groups. The terms appearing in these tools to represent communities defined by gender, race and sexual orientation are frequently inadequate; the placement of these terms in classification categories reflects ideologies and assumptions that are archaic or invalid, and these tools frequently do not provide the fine-grained distinctions that would satisfy the information needs of a member of that community.

As a result of these two insistent problems, the knowledge organization research community has become sceptical of one of its most fundamental tenets: that a document has an innate subject content, which is perceived by the indexer or classificationist, and then translated into the language of the subject access system (Lancaster 1986, 3). "A knowledge organiza-

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tion," states Mai, "is a social construction. It is not a reflection or mirror of an already there structure nor an objective description of reality" (1999, 554).

Knowledge organization research has therefore come to embrace multiplicity and community identity, both in its approaches to revisions of current access tools, and in its development of new ones. Where the Classification Research Group once dreamed of uniting its many subject-specific classifications into a mammoth, theoretically-grounded universal access mechanism, classification research today is moving in the opposite direction. Now we talk of redefining authority control in terms of multiple authorized terms. We talk of information ecologies, "designed to be used within a particular context or environment" (Albrechtsen, 2000, 1). We have moved, argues Beghtol (2000) "from the assumption that classification schemes are culturally neutral (and therefore universally applicable) to the assumption that the schemes are culturally based, culturally biased, and non-universal" (313).

This is particularly welcome news for gay and lesbian communities, whose increasing influence and visibility have led to new frameworks for historical, intellectual, social and political inquiry. By admitting the existence of cultural bases and biases, knowledge organization researchers will inevitably look to such communities as they strive to update existing subject access schemes and create new ones. The result, ideally, will be up-to-date and relevant vocabularies, gay-positive classification categories, and user-friendly website organization principles, all of which will represent, and and grow from, this rich growth of knowledge.

But how are these community-based classification systems going to develop, and what intellectual, conceptual, political and epistemological challenges face those information professionals who take it upon themselves to develop them? Knowledge organization theory is entering a new and highly-politicized era; furthermore, it is embarking on this new era with a fresh suspicion of its own techniques and traditions. In a post-structuralist world, is the concept of a document's intrinsic intellectual content hopelessly naive? And if so, what new tools and new theories will supplement or supplant our old ones? What practical and theoretical problems can the designers of new, contextual access systems expect to face?

These questions are formidable, but knowledge organization theorists should remember that they are not alone. Other fields deal with the subject content of documents; other fields have discovered that their "universal" axioms are in fact contextual and subjective, and must therefore be revised to accommodate the concerns of marginalized groups. This paper examines one such example.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the literary studies community in Europe and North America experienced an epistemological revolution similar to the one facing classification research today. Literary critics were suddenly forced to acknowledge that their techniques and assumptions were anything but universal constants, and that certain communities and minorities demanded new techniques and different assumptions. In particular, the rise of gay and lesbian studies, and later queer theory, caused the literary studies community to reexamine many of its canonical texts, and to see them in very different lights. Formerly marginalized works, such as Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, suddenly acquired a new interest, while works of authors such as Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Henry James were scrutinized for homosexual themes and content.

The fate of one canonical work, Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, holds a special interest for us, because it served both as the basis of a long tradition of traditional American Literature criticism, and as a lightning rod for the new queer theory in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In particular, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, one of the most important innovators in queer theory, made *Billy Budd* a central part of her seminal work, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). By looking at the fate of both Melville and Sedgwick in the literary studies community, we can see some of the challenges, and some of the possible solutions, that face us in knowledge organization research, as we struggle to create subject access theories and tools based on specific cultures, contexts, or communities.

This paper, then, has the following major parts. It begins by discussing a distinction fundamental to both traditional classification theory and traditional literary criticism: the distinction between "aboutness" as an expression of the fundamental content of the document, and "meaning" as an expression of a specific use to which the document is put. Second, it uses this distinction to summarize attitudes to *Billy Budd* in the mainstream literary criticism in the twentieth century, particularly in relation to the story's homosexual content. Third, the discussion moves to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's treatment of the story, within the context of her controversial theory of male homosexuality and its place in Western structures of

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thought. And finally, by looking at the reactions in academia to Sedgwick's theories, the paper isolates specific tensions that arise in queer theory, and their implications for providing subject access in a gay-centered information environment.

One point should be added here. Sedgwick's theory in *Epistemology of the Closet* concerns male homosexuality exclusively: not because she lacks sympathy with, or interest in, lesbian sexuality as a theoretical issue, but because her theory is grounded specifically in the attitudes of Western culture to male homosexuality. In the ensuing discussion, I do not assume that male and female homosexuality are alike and interchangeable. I do, however, assume that the implications of Sedgwick's male-centered theory raise practical subject access concerns that affect female as well as male homosexual communities.

1. Aboutness and Meaning

Determining the subject content of a document has always been a highly subjective procedure. While the tools for translating the analysis of content into a retrieval system are complex and sophisticated, "there are few, if any, formal rules for the conceptual analysis of documents" (Williamson 1996, 156). The task becomes even more complicated with imaginative literature such as works of fiction because of the ambiguous boundary between content and interpretation. It is very difficult to determine "what kind(s) of factual, relatively unvarying data is present in fiction ... . In a way, every reader reads a different book" (Beghtol 1994, 125). In terms of homosexual content, this ambiguity has been both a spur to literary achievement and a barrier to the widespread acceptance of gay interpretations. "Homosexual novels are characteristically subtle, allusive and symbolic...and form an eighth kind of literary ambiguity" (Meyers 1977, 1). Placing a work like *Billy Budd* into a gay literary canon, therefore, requires some theoretical framework for distinguishing data from interpretation: can we isolate in the story homosexual characters, or homosexual themes, and confidently treat them as stable content that everybody reads?

Knowledge organization theorists have made some progress in defining such a framework. Fairthorne (1971) distinguishes between what discourse "mentions" and what discourse is "about":

> What discourse speaks of, – that is, what it mentions by name or description – , are amongst its extensional properties. What discourse speaks on, – that is, what it is about – , is amongst its intensional properties. This, its topic, cannot be determined solely from what it mentions. For this one must take into account extra-textual considerations, such as who is using it for what purpose, what purpose the author intended it to be used for, and for whom and for what the librarian, or other manager of messages, acquired it. (361)

Fairthorne bases his distinction on the concept of explicit "mention": equally important, he suggests that the "aboutness" of a document, in any meaningful sense, often needs something beyond what is explicitly mentioned.

Beghtol (1986) reinterprets this distinction as one between "aboutness" and "meaning," the former being the intrinsic content of the document and the latter the uses to which a reader may put the document:

> For the present purposes ... we may take the general position that texts of all kinds have a relatively permanent aboutness, but a variable number of meaning (s). ... A recognition of the relatively permanent quality of aboutness in documents is one of the assumptions upon which bibliographic classification systems have traditionally been based. Classificationists have endeavoured to create classification systems conceptually and notationally hospitable to any aboutness a document might present, but it has not been suggested that the inherent aboutness of the document changes when a particular meaning is attached to it or a particular use made of it by the reader. (85)

While the "meaning" of a work, then, can vary from reader to reader, aboutness is relatively stable, and can be identified and translated into a classification symbol or a set of controlled descriptors.

Fairthorne anchors "aboutness" in the document's context, while Beghtol's definition suggests that aboutness resists context to a certain degree. But both present aboutness as some intrinsic element of the document's intellectual content, and the successful extraction and translation of that intrinsic content constitutes useful subject access. If the aboutness is stable, then ideally the subject analyst should be able to identify it accurately and consistently all the time. Consistency has always been a primary objective of subject analysis: "In the current environment of global bibliographic information systems, it is essential to provide guidance in the design and development of the tools used in order to achieve, insofar as is possible,

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inter-system and intra-system consistency and compatibility" (Williamson 1996, 158).

Knowledge organization theory, then, brings a recognition that a complex distinction must be made between data and interpretation; it brings a strategy for distinguishing between stable content and variable meanings; and it employs that strategy in an attempt to bring about consistent and replicable indexing activities. What happens if we apply this strategy in a field and a context where the distinction between data and interpretation is highly charged? Can we say, using the meaning/aboutness division, that there is homosexual content in a story like *Billy Budd*?

2. Billy Budd, Literary Criticism, and Queer Theory

Let us begin with Fairthorne's extensional properties, and attempt to summarize the plot of *Billy Budd*, solely in terms of what is explicitly mentioned. The story concerns a British warship, the *Bellipotent*, in the late eighteenth century, under the command of Captain Vere. A young foretopman, Billy Budd, has been impressed into service, and his cheerful manner and handsome appearance make him a popular and valued member of the crew. He also attracts the malice of Claggart, the master-at-arms, who arrests him on a trumped-up charge of being a mutineer. Billy, when confronted with this, strikes Claggart, and accidentally kills him. Captain Vere, while sympathizing with Billy, feels impelled to uphold navy justice and discipline, and Billy is sentenced to hang.

As any literary critic would point out, even this stark description distorts the text into an interpretation, by virtue of the plot details it chooses to omit. And because homosexuality often appears through implication, rather than through explicit mention, let us supplement this summary with a single quotation from the text, which will hopefully provide access to some of the extra-textual implications. In a scene that figures frequently in criticism, Billy Budd, unaware that he has become the object of Claggart's malevolent interest, accidentally spills his soup on the deck, just as Claggart is approaching.

> [Claggart] happened to observe who it was that had done the spilling. His countenance changed. Pausing, he was about to ejaculate something hasty at the sailor, but checked himself, and pointing down to the streaming soup, playfully tapped him from behind with his rattan, saying in a low musical voice peculiar to him at times, 'Handsomely done, my lad! And handsome is as handsome did it, too!" And with that passed on. (321-22).

We are never explicitly told why Claggart is obsessed with Billy Budd: the narrator instead alludes enigmatically to "an antipathy spontaneous and profound" (323), to a Platonic concept of "Natural Depravity," and to the difficulties of trying to "enter his labyrinth and get out again" (324).

2.1 Billy Budd and the Critics

These teasing hints of things unsaid have fascinated critics since the story's first posthumous appearance in 1924. Early critics attempted to fill the gaps left by the narrator by arguing that the story was "about" particular themes: mutiny and discipline (Parker 1990, 76); fall and redemption (Mason 1951, 25); innocence and evil (Arvin 1957, 294). Later critics argue that the story is about homosexuality, if only in a veiled way (Matthieson 1941, 161; Martin 1986, 112; Parker 1990, 103). Others argue that the story is "about" silence and ambiguity, rather than any hidden reasons for silence (Brodtkorb 1967, 604; Johnson 1979, 573).

This critical history of *Billy Budd* reflects a general shift of emphasis in literary criticism from a set of supposedly stable meanings to an emphasis on contextual and subjective readings. The early Melville critics explicitly assume that their interpretations are bias-free and universal. Arvin, for instance, argues that his interpretation is as "extensional," in Fairthorne's terms, as the words themselves:

> Everyone has felt this benedictory quality in [*Billy Budd*]. Everyone has felt it to be the work of a man on the last verge of mortal existence who wishes to take his departure with a word of acceptance and reconciliation on his lips. (292)

As the century progresses, the trend shifts in the opposite direction, particularly in the wake of reader response criticism, which has placed the significance of interpretation on the reader: "reader-response critics would argue that a poem cannot be understood apart from its results. Its 'effects,' psychological and otherwise, are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of a reader" (Tompkins, 1980, ix). Bonati makes a distinction between "*text* as a particular set of signs that we recognize as such, and *work* as the product and the experience of the appropriate decoding of the text" (231). In subject analysis terms, these approaches emphasize the importance of the text's "meaning" over its aboutness.

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And it presents this meaning, not as an innate quality waiting to be "discovered," but as the result of an operation, variously defined as realization, appropriation, and decoding.

This emphasis on the reader eventually undermines the notion of the text itself, to the point where "aboutness" in the subject analysis sense does not exist at all: "There is no rigorous way to distinguish fact from interpretation, so nothing can be deemed to be definitively *in* the text prior to interpretive conventions" (Culler 5). The more one looks for intrinsic content, the more one finds that even the most stable, formal features of a text are constructed and interpreted by individual readers within the context of specific discourse communities.

Literary theory, then, has never produced a distinction between data and interpretation which could be meaningfully aligned with the distinction between aboutness and meaning. Early criticism treats even the most idiosyncratic interpretation as an expression of the text's stable content; later criticism has undermined the possibility of any stable content. Just as classification theorists are now becoming convinced that essential, universal meanings are impossible, literary theorists have had to face the ultimate subjectivity of their own interpretations.

2.2 Sedgwick and Queer Theory

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick barely ruffled the feathers of the Melville tradition in 1990, when "*Billy Budd*: After the Homosexual," appeared as a chapter of her second major work on male homosocial relations in literature, *The Epistemology of the Closet*. Reviews in the major literary studies journals were highly complimentary towards her interpretation of the story, an interpretation which argued that all desire in the story was homosexual desire, that men turned each other into erections, and that the hanging of Billy offers an apocalyptic vision of a post-homosexual world, in which homosexuality as a potential force of mutinous desire is ejaculated and discharged. Even the staid mainstream titles in English and American Literature hailed her readings as "sharp" and "resonant" (Kincaid 1992, 415), "subtle" and "complex" (Gubar 1991, 115), and "ingenious and persuasive" (Thorslev 1992, 559). Subsequent readings of *Billy Budd* routinely cite Sedgwick in their initial critical surveys, generally in a complimentary fashion (Crain, 1994; Ruttenberg, 1994).

Sedgwick's importance for subject analysis, however, lies not in what she says about *Billy Budd*, but in the theoretical framework which underlies what she says. To understand how Sedgwick interprets *Billy Budd*, we need to recognize that *Epistemology of the Closet*, even more than her previous book, *Between Men* (1985), is a work that combines literary criticism and literary theory, and combines them both with social analysis. The literary readings in *Epistemology of the Closet* explore the ways in which male homosexuality, and the systematic paranoia and oppression with which it is socially viewed, infiltrates the epistemological foundations of Western society and culture. Furthermore, Sedgwick argues that the new visibility of gay communities in the wake of the AIDS epidemic have made this paranoia and oppression a topic of major social urgency. Literary criticism, then, appears within a context that includes legal decisions in the United States regarding male homosexuality, the political and social identity of the American gay community in the late 1980s, and the uses and abuses of medical education and research. Underlying Sedgwick's entire study are two primary theses:

- That an underlying definitional distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality structures thought in modern Western culture (1); and
- That we can best understand this distinction in terms of a binary tension between a minoritizing view, which sees homosexuality as the experience of a distinct and marginalized subset of society, and a universalizing view, which sees homosexuality, and homosexual concerns, as something which pervades all thought and all social levels (1).

On the basis of these theses, Sedgwick articulates a number of axioms, four of which are especially relevant to us in classification research:

- People differ from each other in ways that defy our traditional tools of articulating difference. Therefore, established categories (such as "straight" and "gay") are often inadequate, and survival often depends on the ability to make, alter and remake provisional categorizations about the kinds of people there are in the world (23).
- Gender and orientation issues can be relevant, even in cases where such issues form no part of the thematic "content" (34)
- That the nature vs. nurture question in gay studies needs to be recast, and that the important question is not, "How do people come to be

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gay," but "for whom is the homo/heterosexual definition of central importance?" (40)

- That historical studies, in their effort to expose social constructions of homosexuality in the past, have inadvertently created a falsely coherent and monolithic presentation of homosexuality "as we know it today." (44).

These theses and axioms have suggestive implications for subject access theory. First, they suggest that issues of categorization, both as grouping and as differentiation, have a vital role in the growth and survival of homosexual communities. Second, if Sedgwick's claims are justified, then it is possible to argue that *all* works, regardless of their overt content, are, to some extent, "about" homosexuality. A classification system designed for the gay male community, therefore, could theoretically encompass virtually all documents from all subject areas.

Third, gay communities and gay theorists continue to be split between essentialist and constructivist theories of homosexuality. On the one hand, readers and critics feel what Sedgwick calls a "potentially paralytic demand for essence" (92): the isolation and celebration of a transhistorical, transcultural phenomenon called "homosexuality," which can be uncovered by the careful and relentless dismantling of historical prejudices and traditions of silencing. On the other hand, many readers follow Foucault, who argued that the modern "homosexual" appeared in 1870, when the practice of "sodomy" ceased to refer to acts and became rooted in the individual identity (1978, 43). Adherents to this approach isolate images and paradigms of homosexuality, not as eternal constants, but as local, historical, cultural constructs that may not hold true in different times or places.

The subject access system designed for a gay information ecology, therefore, has not banished multiplicity and conflict by moving from the universal to the particular. Within gay communities, Sedgwick suggests, people are different, categories shift, and labels are provisional. We are dealing with no monolithic identity, no stable categories, and no consensus. Furthermore, she suggests, survival within a marginalized group depends on the regular and frequent subversion of traditional classification categories.

While Sedgwick's analysis of *Billy Budd* has been well-received, these broad theoretical assumptions have been less fortunate. Sedgwick faced particularly keen opposition in the critical theory community, and objections to her theories and axioms began before *Epistemology* was published. David van Leer's influential critique of her work (1989) challenges Sedgwick's use of language, and suggests that her colloquial style, which uses such terms as "fag hag" and "bitch," betrays a latent homophobia. The problem, van Leer argues, is not one of personal sympathy: Sedgwick's sympathy with, and sense of allegiance with, the gay community, particularly the gay male community, is never questioned; nor are her consciously gay-positive intentions. The problem, rather, is that Sedgwick is not a gay man:

> Sedgwick's majority status vis-à-vis gay men is most evident in her problematic terminology, of which her use of sexual stereotypes is only the most obvious example. Unable to speak from within the minority, Sedwick must perforce speak from within the majority; denied the language of homosexuality, she necessarily speaks heterosexuality. Such a vocabulary is inevitably prejudicial. (604)

Van Leer's argument is damning: as someone who inevitably speaks from outside the community rather than from within, Sedgwick, despite her good intentions, has "disempowered" that community: "she does not uncover a homophobic thematics but underwrites one" (604). What she *is* overwhelms what she tries to *do*.

Sedgwick's plight in the theory community suggests a startling consequence of the new assumptions of subjectivity. Even as literary theory has discredited the idea of a permanent subject matter inherent in the literary text, it has resurrected "aboutness" in a different context. If indeed there is nothing in the text that can be isolated as "intrinsic," then any analysis, any tool, any method that provides others with a means of finding coherence and meaning in a text is subject to scrutiny. The critical task is no longer to find content in the text, but rather to identify and articulate the ideological, social and cultural positions from which others find content in the text.

3. Three Binarisms Affecting a Community-Based System of Subject Access based on Sexual Orientation

What, then, does this specific example from literary studies and queer theory suggest for the creator of a community-based subject access system, based on sexual orientation? I suggest that knowledge organization will have to grapple with the same two binarisms that plague literary theory:

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- Essentialist views vs. constructivist views of homosexuality: homosexuality as a permanent, unchanging reality vs. homosexuality as the construction of specific historical forces and contexts.
- Minoritizing views vs. universalizing views: homosexuality as the lifestyle of a minority of the human community, vs. homosexuality as a concept with universal implications for everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation.

In addition, the subject analyst will continue to grapple with our more familiar binarism:

- Aboutness vs. meaning: homosexuality as an intrinsic part of a document's intellectual content, vs. homosexuality as a means of using and interpreting documents, regardless of their explicit or innate content.

How, then, can we expect these three binary tensions to appear in the task of constructing a contextual classification system for use within gay communities?

3.1 Essentialist vs. Constructivist Views

In his *Rules for a Dictionary Catalog*, Cutter argued that a catalogue should use the most current and familiar terminology to denote concepts: when choosing between synonymous headings, one should prefer the one that "is most familiar to the class of people who consult the library" (1904, 7). Olson has already critiqued this image of the "normal user" as a concept that oppresses and marginalizes those that do not conform to the norm (1996). In a gay-centered context, the practice becomes even more problematic, because there is no consensus on an unpopular but persistent question: is there anything out there called "homosexuality," which has existed through the ages, and which is waiting to be uncovered? Some argue that we must be wary of treating homosexuality as an essential entity through the ages; even when we treat it as a social construction, we must avoid the assumption that we are witnessing, in the decline of former constructions of homosexuality, "the emergence of a proto-modern 'homosexual identity'" (McFarlane, 2000 4). Scholars, however, particularly those engaged in historical research, have faced opposition from those in the gay community who argue that there is something called "homosexuality," with a history of its own which has been repressed, and which must be resurrected.

The classificationist, then, can expect to be torn, as gay critics and gay historians have been torn, between the academy and the gay community. An access tool founded upon a teleological view of homosexuality "as we know it today" might well adopt a policy similar to that of the Library of Congress: selecting the most current term, and either rejecting earlier terms or treating them as equivalencies. Indeed, many critiques of the Library of Congress are founded on just such a view: like Sanford Berman, Ellen Greenblatt attacks the Library of Congress for its sluggish responses to updating terms: "The Library of Congress has been slow to implement changes in the language of LCSH to reflect common usage and current terminology" (1990, 76). Such an approach, however, runs the risk of losing the historical dimension to current terms, preventing researchers from charting the evolution of concepts and terms from one period to another.

On the other hand, a tool which was oriented to the different ways in which concepts of sexuality and homosexuality are constructed in different eras would be highly sensitive to creating equivalencies, and to the imposition of current interpretations on terms that have a long and varied life of signification. This is particularly the case for terms like sodomy, which Foucault designated an "utterly confused category" (101), and which, over time, has been used to denote activities as diverse as bestiality, priestly celibacy, masturbation, birth control, pederasty, and luxurious consumption (MacFarlane 2000, 4). Given that many current laws pertaining to homosexuality use terms and texts that are handed down from the Renaissance and the Colonies (Goldberg, 1992, 11), to what extent should syndetic references in an access tool reflect such terminological looseness?

3.2 Minoritizing vs. Universalizing Viewpoints

In his landmark treatment of homosexuality in Hollywood movies, *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo cites a number of quotations from directors and actors who were promoting movies with homosexual themes. All claim that their movies are not "about" homosexuality, but about something else: "the power to destroy people's lives," "loneliness," or "insanity" (Russo, 126). Russo's wry list certainly points out an underlying homophobia in Hollywood and in North America, in its desire to deny the presence of homosexual themes, and in the repeated connections of homosexuality with loneliness, insanity, or both. The speakers' comments, however, indicate a standard technique for counteracting homophobia. To use Sedgwick's term, this is a "universalizing" method:

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homosexuality is made "mainstream" by arguing that its concerns are not those of a specific minority, but those of the human community as a whole. You don't have to be homosexual to understand loneliness or insanity: such themes are universal, and the presence of homosexual characters need not prevent anyone from paying to see the movie.

Not every gay artist approves of this approach. Harvey Fierstein, in an interview for the movie version of *The Celluloid Closet*, responds vigorously to this "universalizing" trend, using another concept central to subject analysis: "translation":

> All the reading I was given to do in school was heterosexual; I mean, every movie I saw was heterosexual, and I had to do this "translation." I had to translate it to my life, rather than seeing my life. Which is why, when people say to me, "your work isn't really gay work, it's universal," and I say, "up yours," you know. "It's gay. And that you can take it and translate it for your own life is very nice, but at last I don't have to do the translating. You do."

If the gay community is split between two concepts of survival – integration into a universal whole and separation into a visible minority – then a classification system will have to negotiate that split. The universalizing tendency will tend to treat explicit subject headings with suspicion. Even as Sanford Berman campaigns for introducing new subject headings that promote the visibility of minority concerns, his objections to such headings as "Women as accountants" and "Women in agriculture" suggest that visibility is a double-edged sword: "The 'as' strongly suggests that women are not ordinarily competent or otherwise equipped to work at accountancy" (Berman 1993, 145). The universalizing approach implies that the explicit presence of a topic in a subject access system implies a deviation from the norm. The minoritizing view, on the other hand, may well argue, as Fierstein has argued, for "visibility at any cost"; "I"d rather have negative than nothing." (Celluloid Closet).

3.3 Aboutness and Meaning

If community-based classification systems follow current thinking in knowledge organization research, we can expect that the system will be contextual, socially determined, and culturally relative. However, the reaction to *Epistemology of the Closet* suggests that the creators and implementers of such a system can expect careful, sometimes ruthless scrutiny. While the terms, concepts and categories can be assumed to reflect a specific cultural position, rather than an innate and essential system of universal categories, the system itself, and the people who design and use it, will be evaluated for their stated and unstated positions and biases.

Furthermore, this scrutiny will never end, and this is something that subject analysts will have to get used to. Berman's attacks on the Library of Congress all suggest that the Subject Headings, in their nuances, terms, and implicit categories, manifest an unenlightened point of view: in this case, "a host of untenable – indeed, obsolete and arrogant – assumptions" (Berman, 1993, 15). The problem, he implies, can be alleviated by being more enlightened, and responding more quickly to the suggestions of enlightened people. The attacks on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, on the other hand, assert that she is an intelligent, frequently ingenious scholar who has done good work from excellent personal motives, but who nonetheless manifests in her work the inescapable features of her ideological, intellectual, social and cultural position.

If Sedgwick has had a rough ride, the makers of a classification system based on a specific community cannot expect to be scrutinized any less carefully. Nor can they protect themselves with naïve protestations of being "bias-free," or consulting some arbitrary abstraction known as "the ordinary user." The makers of new classification systems will be expected to articulate their position relative to the community for whom the system is designed. This position will make a fundamental part of the tool's nature, and will become the means whereby readers, users and critics of the system will rebel, and find their own provisional categories. The makers of subject access tools are used to asking themselves the first question: "Who are my users?" They will now have to tackle two additional, equally challenging questions: "Who am I in relation to my users, and how does my position manifest itself in the tool itself?"

Conclusion

Classification theory and practice, then, stands on the threshold of a whole range of new developments. The forthcoming confusion, however, can be alleviated by looking at, and learning from, the experiences of document subject analysis in other fields. The example provided by *Billy Budd*, and by Eve Kosfosky Sedgwick, suggests that our break from the past, while profound, is by no means complete. Our belief in subjectivity has not banished the distinction between

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aboutness and meaning, but merely displaced it into a new set of relationships. And, if gay theory and gay communities are any indication, even limiting a classification to a particular community's aims and concerns will by no means make achieving consensus any easier. Categories are fluid and unstable. Community members want both to see themselves as permanent and unchanging, and to see themselves as socially constructed; they want to belong and to remain apart. By acknowledging these inevitable ambiguities, classification researchers will be well-positioned to create new, better subject access tools. But they will do so only by acknowledging that the tough questions are here to stay, and that complexity, debate and controversy can be negotiated, but not banished.

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