From “Coming Out” to “Becoming”:
Locating, Performing, and Re-engineering
the Geography of the Closet

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Abstract

While recent geographical approaches adopted by gay studies are focused on prescribing how desires can be situated and spatialized, this study attempts to raise a more fundamental question: how can geography help revising and reconstructing the existent identification structure in gay cultures? Its objective is to investigate the performative power underlying the geography of the closet, and then probe into the implications of coming out in this new framework. To do so, the study re-examines the theories by Sedgwick, Butler, Focault, Deleuze, as well as the life and work of American gay writer Edmund White. Gay identity and its geography are never in a harmonious relationship; on the contrary, it is full of tensions, paradoxes, manipulations and delusions. To reconcile these issues, as this research intends to suggest in the end, depends on how to re-engineer the geography of the closet.

Keywords: Eve K. Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Performativity, Geography, Queer Theory, Gay Studies, Homosexuality, the closet

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1. Introduction

Interdisciplinary interests in geography have been increasing in recent cultural studies. By incorporating geography into the conventional frameworks of disciplines such as anthropology, economy and sociology, many new inquiries have succeeded in “locating” new problems and sometimes possible solutions. For queer theory and gay studies, quite a few titles with geographical approaches have been published as well. However, not all of them have expanded or renovated the current investigations of the relations of space/power/knowledge in gay culture. Some efforts, such as mapping out the “Gay New York” or the “Queer Metropolis,” often confuse historical documentation with geographical construction. While some of them are no more than tourist guidebooks, some others are preoccupied with the subcultures in gay ghettos in the manner of Benjamin’s “flâneur.”

Either for a documentation of a city’s past, or for a cultural analysis that relates spatial themes to gender issues, these geographical approaches adopted by gay studies are effective merely in prescribing how homosexual mores and desires can be situated and spatialized, instead of raising a more

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fundamental question: how can geography help revising and reconstructing the existent identification structure in gay cultures?

As long as the debates over the legitimacy of gay identities persist, most gay desires, homosexual practices, customs and rules are still encoded by, and/or enfolded into “the closet,” rather than spatially assured and connected to the society. Readily presuming an essentialist connection between gay people and gay spaces, those inquiries overlook the context within which the possible transmission, transformation and subversion of gay identities take place---namely, the geography of the closet.

By resorting to Sedgwick’s epistemology of the closet and Butler’s theory of gender performativity, many studies have presented theoretical arguments disclosing the closet as deployment by heterosexual domination. In daily vernaculars, “the closet” is often referred to the design of secrecy and denial in gay life. Both perceptions simplify the term’s connotations by treating the closet as nothing but the barrier to claiming one’s gay identity. In fact, the concept of the closet is so enmeshed in multiple gay experiences that its relations with gay identity cannot be generalized as a metaphor for the stigmatization and oppression of gay people. Meanwhile, despite the strategic efforts of queer theory, they often fail to address the fact that gay people, even after they come out of the closet, are still uncertain and divided in terms of their destiny and self-knowledge. As a result, most theorists and activists have to compromise by postponing the issue that there is an apparent gap between the declaration of “I’m gay” and the reality of “living a gay life,” as they try to unite resistances under the banner of “out of the closet.”
This study aims to locate a new foundation on which the relations of gay identity and the closet can be re-examined. To construct the geography of the closet, therefore, is an attempt for a production of new knowledge, instead of merely designating, legitimizing, or celebrating existing gay spaces and gay urban subculture. Whereas other studies tend to regard the relations between the closet and gay identity in a staid, metaphorical and, above all, negative way, I will examine them from an interactive, empirical and positive perspective, in hope of uncovering the closet’s transforming and subversive powers.

Is the inside/outside of the closet mainly the result of speech acts? Is the spatial connotation of the term metaphorical other than material? Why do most gay people make geographical rearrangements, such as relocating, as a necessary supplement to their coming-out acts? Most of them also need to learn how to fit in so-called “gay life” on different physical levels and geographical scales---from bodies to gay bars, from domestic partnerships to political assemblies. The codes and rules for each practice differ; in other words, gay identities are constantly shaping and shaped by their locations and positions around/between the closet(s). Therefore, the closet is not only a signifier that refers to oppressive power, but also a condition under which the configuration of gay desires and longings are made possible.

Therefore, this study will, first of all, try to recognize the closet as geographically fluid other than ideologically fixed, realistic other than conceptual, in order to re-locate the essential problem of the coming-out politics---toward what do gay people come out? A theoretical and empirical inquiry at once, this study also employs the geographical
approach to overcome the shortcomings of being overly texts-bound and rhetoric as seen in some inquiries such as Sedgwick’s work. Its objective is to re-engineer the geography of the closet by illustrating how the closet can also be a geographical performance, a foundation on which new perspectives can emerge and converge. Even though Foucault never explicitly acknowledged the influence of geography on his work, his interests in spaces and power dispersions are unambiguous. When pressed to explain this inclination in an interview, he finally agreed by saying that “Geography acted as the support, the condition of possibility for the passage between a series of factors I tried to relate.”¹ Likewise, to locate, perform and re-engineer the geography of the closet will rely on the discovery of new passages to go in and come out of the closet---or closets.

To investigate the performative power underlying the geography of the closet, and then probe into the implications of coming out in this new framework will be the methodological structure of this study. I will argue why geographical modes and perspectives can lead to a deeper discovery of one’s gay identity within and beyond the closet, through a journey of “becoming” rather than “coming out.” In the meantime, I will propose a new concept of my invention, performative geography, a convergence of Butler’s theory of gender performativity and Deleuze’s concept of “repetition with a difference,” in order to promote the closet’s performative power.

American gay writer Edmund White’s life and work are crucial to this

¹ The interview was conducted by the editors of the journal Herodote. With the title of “Question on Geography,” the transcript is included in Power/Knowledge-Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977 ed. by Colin Gordon. (77) Italics mine.
research, for he exemplifies the performative geography as proposed in this study. Through travel, migration and relocation, the artist performs multiple gay identities in constantly changing contexts and forms of the closet. Gay identity and its geography are never in a harmonious relationship; on the contrary, it is full of tensions, paradoxes, manipulations and delusions, which can be best illustrated by White’s work and his life.

2. Deconstructing Sedgwick’s Epistemology of the Closet

Even though spatial connotations are more than apparent in the term “the closet,” how to spatialize the closet is not without problems. One of the paradoxes is that theorists sometimes are inclined to overlook the obvious/material while they endeavor to disclose the hidden/metaphorical, such as codes and power relations embedded in the term. However, the spatialization of the closet is inseparable from lived experiences and its physical aspect should not be overshadowed by its philosophical and political aspects in discourses. In The Production of Space, Henri Lefebvre has reminded us of the consequence of possible abyss when mental and physical spaces cannot be reconciled:

The quasi-logical presupposition of an identity between mental space (the space of the philosophers and epistemologists) and real space creates an abyss between the mental sphere on one side and the physical and social space on the other…No matter how relevant, the problem of knowledge and the “theory of knowledge” have been abandoned in favor of a reductionistic return to an absolute—or supposedly absolute—knowledge, namely the knowledge of the
history of philosophy and the history of science. Such a knowledge can only be conceived of as separated from both ideology and non-knowledge (i.e. from lived experience). (6)

Similarly, since the closet is crucial to the differentiation between gay identity and gay politics, it should be understood in the mode of reconciliation between philosophy and reality, the theory and the practice, the mental and the physical. When I analyze Sedgwick’s work in this section, I aim to provide a balanced perspective on the subject of the closet. Focusing on the physical aspect of the closet which is not given adequate discussions in her work, my efforts inevitably have to highlight only certain approaches she has adopted, but not the whole. Rather than an expression of suspicion of her theory, my analysis is intended to be complementary to her approaches in order to re-open the possibility of the closet praxis.

In her path-breaking post-structural study *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick prescribes the closet as “the defining structure of gay oppression in this century,” which encompasses the denial, concealment, shame, and ignorance of lesbians and gay men living in the society of the heterosexual domination and homophobia. (71) The lack of knowledge of its presence, according to her, allows the specificity of oppression based on the sexual/gender norms to exercise its power. Silence keeps gays and lesbians inside the closet; to expose the heterosexual oppression is to reveal the secret, the unspeakable. She conceptualizes “closetedness” as the performance of “a particular speech act of silence,” which “depends on and highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing there as is knowledge.”(4)
Therefore, to demolish the silence, she goes on to uncover the homo-social subtexts in Melvill’s *Billy Budd*, Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and James’ “Beast in the Jungle.” In her analysis of these literary texts, Sedgwick produces a long list of oppositional concepts embedded in the works, such as natural/unnatural, urbane/provincial, secrecy/disclosure, health/illness, etc., hoping to introduce how these binarisms, of which their origins might be a ramification from the homo/heterosexual definition, are organized in our culture. For her, “the relations of the closet—the relations of the known and unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition—have the potential of being revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally.”

In the discussion of *Billy Budd*, Sedgwick actually notices that “the ship” is a site of spatialized power. Trying to tie the “Shakespearean theatre” of the sailing ship to the theme of the closet, she argues that the truth “the architectural vernaculars of the nineteenth century…conspired to cover…(is)that the difference between ‘public’ and private’ could never be stably or intelligibly represented as a difference between two concrete classes of physical space.” (110) Ironically, her argument only stretches the concept of the closet and also fails to ground it in a more “concrete

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2 For example, in her discussion of *Dorian Grey*, Sedgwick makes a distinction between “a minority rhetoric of the ‘open secret’ or glass closet” and “a subsumptive public rhetoric of the ‘empty secret’ in Wilde’s time, based on which the novel is read as a “performative work of enabling a European community of gay mutual recognition and self constitution.” (164, 173)

3 Sedgwick argues, from the turn of the last century, “every given person, just as considered necessarily assignable to a male or female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable to a homo-or hetero-sexuality, a binarized identity that was full of implications, however confusing, for even the ostensibly least sexual aspects of personal existence. It was this new development that left no space in the culture exempt from the potent incoherences of homo/heterosexual definition.” (2)
physical space.” The kind of associations between homosexuality and location she exhibits can be best illustrated by her reflection on the term “sodomy”:

That sodomy, the name by which homosexual acts are known…should already be inscribed with the name of a site of extermination is the appropriate trace of a double history…it is ambiguous whether every denizen of the obliterared Sodom was a sodomite…Following both Gibbon and the Bible, moreover, with an impetus borrowed from Darwin, one of the very few areas of agreement among modern Marxist, Nazi, and liberal capitalist ideologies is that there is a peculiarly close, though never precisely defined, affinity between same-sex desire and historical condition of moribundity, called “decadence”… (128)

Her approach is mainly focused on the metaphorical/linguistic aspect of the term, deriving from the deconstructionist notion of how intricate the workings of power/knowledge can be.

Michael Brown, a geographer who suggests other modes of investigations, argues that the term “closet” is empirical and material as well as metaphorical: “the closet’s epistemology is only rarely spatialized. And when it is, it is done in a narrow sense: that of the text itself rather than empirical social settings. Sedgwick’s work, for instance, is primarily a textual geography of the closet.”(15) If the closet works to signify the deployment of not telling, or knowing by not knowing, it has to be a discursive formation that engages in more complex contextual performatives than just the speech act. Otherwise, “in-the-closet” spells
out merely a reinforcement of heterosexual hegemony, rather than the recognition of a collective experience, unless we can inscribe each in-the-closet experience as actually *happening*, with its identifiable *situation and location*.

Sedgwick doesn’t seem aware of the paradox that her own speech-act performance of “revealing the closet” actually betrays her reinforcement of normative power. At one point she writes: “for many gay people it (the closet) 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.” Whereas she emphasizes the ubiquitous homosexual oppression imposed by the closet, the statement also ironically affirms the necessity of the closet. By claiming all gay people are living under the influence of the closet, Sedgwick unwillingly undermines her theoretical premises. It is similar to saying that the closet is no more than a general term for all prejudices. The black people are living in some kind of the closet, so are the fat people and the Jew, and so on.

In reality, the closet does not necessarily encourage living a lie; sometimes it serves as a means of networking or finding safety, or simply for sexual contacts. Those transactions are as much sociological as geographical, since their “grounds” can vary from one’s own body to global trekking. Sedgwick is reluctant to admit that the closet can be also shaped by another form of normative power generated by gay liberation.⁴ To confuse homosexual oppression with gay identification, she is resonant

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⁴ There have always been divided attitudes among gay activists. Queer activists often emphasize the “abnormal,” “queer” power, while others wish for assimilations into the mainstream. This part will be discussed in details in the following section.
with an essentialist view that has been long rejected by feminists. As many anthropological studies show, homosexuality in certain societies and traditions is not only public, but also impervious to the closet anxiety. To grade a person’s character of “courage” and “forthrightness” as accountable for coming out is misleading and likely to do harm to gay people. In fact, “coming out” is always a decision to show one’s concern for values such as honesty and authenticity, and far from being a contest of personality.

Her standpoint becomes more ambiguous as she shifts the attention to “the damaging contradictions of this compromised metaphor of in and out,” since “its relation to the ‘larger’, i.e. ostensibly nongay-related, topologies of privacy in the culture is...so critical, so enfolding, so representational—that the simple vesting of some alternative metaphor has never, either, been a true possibility.” (72) There is a noticeable risk of spatial hierarchy in her view, which prefers “presence” to “absence”, “out” to “in,” since Sedgwick is focused more on the omnipresence of hetero-normativity than on the possibility of new contexts within which homosexual desire and identity can be fully articulated. Her seemingly pessimism, in a way, prevents a possible production of new knowledge. The closet’s relations to its larger non-gay related context ought to be emphasized for its practicality other than its metaphorical/linguistic alternatives.

Sedgwick’s view on the closet is mainly derived from the heterosexual

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5 For example, in Sambia, men’s “eating each other’s penis” is not considered homosexual but practiced as a nurturing rite of passage. Older men ejaculate into the boys’ mouths to “make him a man.” Frank Browning documents a Sambia man’s confession in his book A Queer Geography. (25-26)
hierarchy, which restricts, instead of enhancing the fluidity of the closet. In reality the closet is an ever-changing, constantly evolving site. Take the new technology of cyberspace for example, the user’s anonymity often renders another sort of the closet that challenges our conventional perception of gender performances. Insofar as the closet needs to be disclosed, the knowledge ought not to be only about oppression, as if the closet is a synonym of evil and ugliness. The knowledge can also be a reflection on the diversity, neutrality and/or accessibility of the closet. Without such consciousness, the discussion of the closet runs the risk of falling into an existentialist nihilism, empowering ignorance and the “empty secret” in public rhetoric instead.

The mechanization of heterosexual-patriarchal power/knowledge, like all other deployments of domination, displays itself on various spatial scales and with different degrees of materiality. Even though the practice of “knowing by not knowing” tries to conceal and to oppress homosexuality, the geography of the closet can ironically testify to the very fact of its visibility and irreducibility with actual locations and sites. Also, the spatial arrangements around which resistance and transgression take place need to be reconsidered for their feasibility, instead of being submerged in theoretical assumptions. “Resisting the hetero-patriarchal script does not just entail changing one’s attitude, behaviour, dress, or style,” Brown reminds us after reviewing a series of gay men’s published oral histories. For some men, “it means having to relocate oneself, to leave ‘home’ and reconfigure it elsewhere.”(50) He continues to write that “the closet was often a material space in which their bodies ‘did’ sexuality…Likewise, coming out of the closet often entailed a physical
migration away. Geographic mobility was a material expression of ‘coming out.’ (51)

The closet certainly needs not to be a cause for shame and a reminder of stigmatized gay life only. Following Brown’s criticism of Sedgwick, this study will attempt a new epistemology of the closet, which facilitates geographical support and organization for emerging resistances. I will utilize the geography of the closet for reconstructing gay identities in two ways. On the one hand, it re-affirms the relations between gay bodily positions and physical places; on the other, it reassesses, problemizes, and then refurbishes the gender performativity theory. For Butler, to say that subjective agency is performative is not to say that all is merely an ironic performance. Rather, it is to say that the agency is a matter of response to already given codes. The performative subject cannot determine his/her own conditions or identity. It is only within the practice of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible.

Despite Brown’s criticism that Butler “seems to have considerable difficulty in using performativity in any sort of empirical way beyond the confines of a literary text or a ‘real world’ anecdote,” (32) I will argue that it is because the concept of performativity has not been understood in more diverse empirical contexts. The closet is gender-rendered; but, unlike gender, it is both a signifier and a condition. To repeat the closet in a geographical context provides a possible condition under which coming out of the closet becomes a continuous signifying process, which can gradually erode the identification structure, and eventually undermines Sedgwick’s belief that “the closet is the defining structure of gay oppression.”
I will continue to examine the case of writer/critic Edmond White, whose life demonstrates how the closet can be evoked and performed through traveling and writing, and then analyze how performativity and geography can converge in his coming-out act(s).

3. Edmund White’s Performative Closet

In his 1980’s States of Desire, a pioneer book for its time of gay travel writing, Edmund White provided a city-by-city description of the way homosexual men lived by interviewing a wide variety of gay people and through his personal reflections on the picture of Gay America. No similar books had been published before with his scope and objective of situating different gay experiences in specific environments. The project was commenced after his 1977’s notorious but commercially successful guidebook The Joy of Gay Sex (co-authored with Dr. Charles Silverstein). These two books together, for the first time, introduced to the American general public, gay and straight alike, homosexual lifestyles.

On a personal level, they are crucial to White’s decision to declare his homosexuality through writing. Although he had already come out to his family at the time of the publication of The Joy of Gay Sex, White still had tremendous fear that his family would learn of the book. In States of Desire, he recalls how he tried to avoid visiting his father when he reached his hometown Cincinnati:

My father had never mentioned the book to me. He had also stopped writing me. For that reason I was reluctant to face him. Thank God I did; he died a month later. At the funeral my
steppmother told me he’d never known of the book. She had torn out the ads for it from the newspapers and no one in his circle could have begun to form the syllables making up its title. (168)

It is only one of the many poignant coming-out stories recorded in the book, but the reader can quickly recognize from this anecdote how complex, tangled and repetitive the act of coming out actually is. For one thing, the change of locations can easily push a gay man back in the closet again. A sexually active young man living in New York back then, White still saw that a fulfilled gay identity had eluded him, as a person and a writer as well.

Following the publication of this book, White started a series of autobiographical novels. The first two titles, *A Boy’s Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room is Empty*, which dealt with the themes of a young gay man’s coming-of-age and coming-out-of-the closet, established White as one of the most important writers of American gay literature. In 1983, White left the city New York, where he once made his home, and moved to Paris. He was diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1985. By the time he returned to the U.S. in 2000, he finished two more titles of his autobiographical novel series, and a biography on Jean Genet (winner of National Book Critic Circle Award.) In 1993, he was made a *Chevalier de L’ordre des Arts et des Letters* by French government (an Officer in the French Order of Arts and Letters); in 1997 and 1999, he was twice made a member of American Academy of Arts and Letters.

When he first started writing in the sixties, no literature with evident gay themes was deemed serious or respectable. Despite the candor and earnestness White showed in his writing, the depictions of sex encounters
between gay men, the mores and codes in American gay culture of the time as seen in the *States of Desires*, made him subject to criticism from both gay and heterosexual sides. Straight critics found it lurid, while his gay readers thought he had crossed the boundary by allowing the outsider to peek in too much of the closet—especially its “down-side” of drug, crime and promiscuity.

As a matter of fact, to take such an unflinching look at what is *really* like to be gay in America enlightened White’s later writings. “The decent society one might long for would be as respectful of individual difference as it would be solicitous of collective welfare,” White remarked. “Such a vision is still in the process of being formed, or being imagined, and feminism and gay liberation, which dreamed a rethinking of private life and its connections to politics, can be one locus in which that transformation occurs.” (*States of Desire*, 335-6) To connect private life to politics, White conducted those interviews for *States of Desire* on multiple levels of performativity. First of all, he had to create a double-sense of confession for those men he interviewed. On the one hand, confessions function as a means to maintain the privacy on which mutual recognitions between gay men depend; and on the other, they breach the codes of ignorance and silence. In the meantime, White’s physical presence at each location enabled him to participate in those men’s experience of the closet, and also to transgress the boundaries of local gay mores and customs as an outsider. White’s entry into those men’s closets, along with his coming out to each of them, was no less than a repetitive signifying act by which new connections between geography and homosexuality were established.
As he defended the culture of drag queen, he insightfully commented on how the regional culture and its economic structure in the South affected the formation of the closet. “Drag was once a major gay pursuit throughout the country, and it still lingers on in pockets in unexpected places,” he wrote; “in New Orleans the gay Krewes, in Miami the contests, in small towns the drag shows at gay bars.” He noted that drag was particularly popular in the South:

For many small-town Southerners the only image of another world they receive is from television and the movies. These gay boys in the South, usually isolated from “high culture” (ballet, theatre and opera), grow up watching show business extravaganza on the tube and then re-creating them in the privacy of their bedroom. (Desire, 196-97)

He articulated a new concern that ascribed geographical factors to the diversity of gay sex, the varied degrees of homophobia, and the performativity of the closet. By integrating the geographical context into the reading of the closet, White not only delineated the material closets in various terrestrial locations (i.e. the gay ghetto, hidden bar and park, etc.) and on different spatial scales (body, urban planning, national campaign, etc.), but also opened a wider geographical imagination of the workings of the closet.

From the stories White gathered from the interviews, the codes and wishes expressed by those gay men did not always agree with White’s presumptions. But certain important issues surfaced. First, some men didn’t feel that living in a city with visible gay culture guaranteed their
happiness. Several of them had once chosen New York City or Los Angeles as their homes, but later would give them up. Some even moved back to their original hometowns where they had to face great homophobic threats. In Portland, one man who returned home because he “detested the coldness and competitiveness of New York and the drugginess of Los Angeles.” This man “Hank”6 made White wonder if many gay men, after a certain point of living a gay life, all decided to “bail out” from gay scenes.

Hank’s choice to return home, back to “the extreme form of bourgeois life”---“his house, his solid position in the community, his will to be a family man”--- baffled White for a personal reason. He admitted: “I have misgivings about the future Hank’s chosen, (as I do about my own).” (Desire, 82) At age of thirty-nine, White was on the brink of embarking on an uncertain journey to Europe. Gay liberation drew the line between in the closet and out of it, but leaving most gay men in a stalemate. Including White, they all had to face the frustration of a permanent home which might never come true, and also an unknown future for their status in the society. (Within a few years after the publication of States of Desire, the emergence of AIDS killed most gay men of White’s generation.)

Another frustrating fact that White brought up in this book is the paradoxes about certain “gay metropolis.” Seemingly sophisticated enough to accept homosexuality, they had other hidden dangers for gay men. “Denton” was from a small town in Mississippi, who had wandered from city to city before he settled in San Francisco. He told White he

6 All the men in White’s book were under pseudo-names.
liked there because “the countryside is so wonderful, much as it was in Mississippi,” (Desire, 49) and also “people here are proud of their city.” (Desire, 59) However, the public spirit was contrasted with the scandalous sex scenes on Castro Street. Murder, for example, “seems to happen in San Francisco more often than elsewhere.” Having lived in San Francisco himself before, White described: “Unlike Chicago or New York or London, San Francisco is a small city; its ‘eccentrics’ cannot hide out…they are all constantly in circulation, on display.” San Francisco also “had the highest rate of alcoholism and suicide in the nation,” which White sadly characterized as “indications, perhaps, of frustrated expectations.” (Desire, 53)

Although he never doubted his own homosexuality, he noticed how confused most gay men felt and how easily their expectations could be betrayed. Migration and relocation always played an important part to their quests for identity. Nevertheless, most gay men found themselves fall into another trap of “models” or “mores” once they settled somewhere. In other cases, they imagined an identity for themselves simply based on where they lived. One man who had moved from Milwaukee to Minneapolis made a comparison of the two cities: “Milwaukee is nonpolitical, bar-oriented, whereas Minneapolis is progressive and there are more professionals in the gay community.” He summarized the experience of finding his gay identity by saying that “When you become gay you lose respectability. And when you enter the gay world you plunge into a foreign environment. It takes two, three or four years to master the gay lifestyle. In the process you must break your dependency on straight relatives and friends.” (Desire, 190)
To infer from his description, one may question whether the separation or insulation of a so-called gay community from the straight world is claustrophobic. Does this kind of concentration truly reflect the gay needs, or does it just manipulate and coerce them? White’s contact informed him that “San Francisco is the S/M capital of the country.” Did that mean gay men who were fond of S/M sex had fluxed to the city, or did the particular atmosphere/tension in the city encourage people to start playing it? While the closet can be performative, it also serves as a context itself for gender/sex performance. In response to Butler’s theory of performativity, Gregson and Rose write: “We want to argue that it is not only social actors that are produced by power, but also the spaces in which they perform...performances do not take place in already existing locations...rather, specific performances bring these spaces into being.”

In other words, there is no space already in existence for queer performance; it waits to be mapped out by the performative of power relations. The power relations embedded in “the S/M capital” were maintained by both heterosexual and homosexual exclusions. Whereas sadism/masochism could be regarded as an expression to confront the experiences of oppression, the specific location that embodied S/M sex confirmed gay men’s identity anxiety. It was such homosexual coercion rather than heterosexual normative power that promoted an identification structure based on fear of exclusion.

In a homophobic city, Kansas City, in Midwest, White wrote, “When I mentioned I was interested in gay life, in how gay men live, people assumed I was compiling a bar guide. Gay bars are gay life, they believe. In a bar or bed a man may be gay; otherwise he is straight...the notion that
affectional preference, sexual appetite, shared oppression might color all of one’s experience eluded them.” (Desire, 156) Gay homophobia, along with gay men’s indifference to and/or ignorance of a possible “gay life,” in White’s opinion, is partly the result of heterosexual oppression, and partly because of “the politicization of the Seventies.” (Desire, 94) Gay men were either afraid to admit the shared oppression, or too politicized to acknowledge the experience. White believed in the closet’s performative power especially for the significant marks it left on art and literature: “Oppression can turn people into dreamers, make them stage mental plays of revenge, triumph or ecstatic reconciliation.” But the gay liberation, like feminism, had sometimes “made the past less necessary.” Therefore, White is concerned about whether “the relatively greater frankness of expression has made art and literature less useful to the majority of gays,” since the “new gay arts are flashier and simpler, more spontaneous, explicit, unmediated.” (Desire, 257)

On his arrival in New Mexico, he was reminiscent of the city’s past that had been summoned in the works of those “visionary bohemians,” including D. H. Lawrence, Willa Cather, Georgia O’Keeffe. Believing that “people are pressured into more narrowly prescribed ways of rebelling,” White wrote:

I want to contrast the individualism of the past with the liberation movement of the present. The sort of individualists one sees in Santa Fe are the remnants of a wealthy bohemian clan that sponsored Isadora Duncan, Imagism, and native crafts … The new liberationists, as Octavio Paz has pointed out, have yet to mention “pleasure” at all. For them the new sexual morality is a matter of science
(homosexuality is natural) and justice (homosexuals should have the equal rights). *(Desire, 94-5)*

This particular awareness might have compelled White to start his autobiographical novel series. It was not the codes and rules in the gay sections of each city that reformed his perceptions about being gay. Nevertheless, it was those traditions in all the places—aesthetic, sociological, personal—that composed a geography by which the characteristics of his gay identity were underlined: bohemian, campy, sexually free, hedonist.

The quest for his gay identity was personal and aesthetic at once. White once wrote: “To find the psychic energy to pursue a long career, it seems to me, a writer must juggle between a vigorous, recording curiosity about the world and the ongoing process of self-creation.” *(Library, 104-5)*

To use his own coming out as the theme for his next book, White achieved both a “curiosity about the world” and the “self-creation.” Coming out is not supposed to be a breakup from one’s past. It can also be done through “going back,” to participate in the old surroundings again, to recover the aesthetic integrity of a place from one’s past.

Writing about his childhood gave White the opportunity to *re-immerse* and *re-orient* himself into the geography of home. Most gay men tend to neglect, or fail to appreciate their homes for an aesthetic satisfaction. How much “outness” can a gay man claim, if he can not face his past, his root? Browning’s definition of coming out echoes White’s realization in many ways: “Coming out, we examine, excavate, and reveal aesthetic form within our lives. We relax barriers between our aesthetic imagination—our fantasies—and the experience of our senses—skin, flesh,
As White opened himself up to the memory for his autobiographical novels, he gave a performance not only in the sense of speech acts, but also with a geographical perspective. By tracking his upbringings from one place to another, he created an alternative self; and conversely, through his stand-in, he performed a new geography of the closet that would now stop imprisoning the author. There is a sense of double-performativity in White’s autobiographical novels. How geography and homosexuality converge in his writing-in-traveling demonstrates his exercise of performativity in both contexts. It can stand as an annex to Sedgwick’s statement that “few gay men’s lives are not shaped by the presence of the closet.” White’s extraordinary contribution is that “few closets in Gay America are not shaped by his aesthetics, his humanitarianism and his candor.”

Based on White’s performative closet that addresses a variety of cultural and sexual practices intrinsic to the gay reality, the urgency to re-examine the relations of gay identity and the geography of the closet can be outlined by these questions: Does the multiplicity of the closet(s) account for the dilemma of gay movement? Is coming out losing its purpose? How can we realize the Foucauldian use of geography, which means relating “passages between series of factors,” such as theoretical debates, political agendas, aesthetic differences, economic and racial classes, and formulate them into a new perspective on the closet? Can the geographical construction of the closet “stand for” a future formation of gay communities, and/or a diversity of sexual identities?
4. Becoming Gay: From Butler to Deleuze

As for Derrida, contextual iterability always simultaneously produces the possibility of so-called deviant contexts, so is true for Butler that repeated gender performances can erode the gender codes. The gender codes Butler aims to subvert are mainly generated by heterosexual normative power. However, from White’s exploration of Gay America, certain gay normative powers manifested themselves, too. After decades of deconstructing heterosexual oppression, it seems equally important now to uncover how those gay codes and rules dominate the geography of the closet.

According to Jeffrey T. Nealon, the upshot of Butler’s notion of performativity is that “not everything is structured, but rather that everything is dependent on structures…that are cited and recited in any specific case.” It “would allow us to respond to and to re-inscribe the multiple exclusions that make one identity possible while making other identities impossible or unlivable.”(28) When gay activist Jeffrey Escoffier reflects on the role of coming-out act in homosexual life, he laments that “this process of achieving authenticity, of finding solidarity and community, is also potentially a trap that results in a fixed sense of identity.”(16) In light of the ethic of authenticity, the “outsideness” of the closet might be an ironical concomitant community of exclusions other than inclusions, where new moral codes and norms of behavior are constituted, turning certain conducts and values into the deviants. Therefore, we have to ask if Butler’s argument falters, when the structure it has to undermine becomes that of homosexual exclusions, instead of heterosexual norms.
To expose hetero-normative domination does not always increase gay people’s knowledge about themselves. In some radical cases of gay protesters, the observer might begin to wonder if homosexuality and homophobia are co-dependant, helping each other to consolidate their internal identity. Meanwhile, the repetition of coming-out politics similarly produce a “deviant context” within and outside the closet: the conditions of drag queens, transvestites, transsexuals, S/M, promiscuity, AIDS… all of those which are regarded negative representatives of gay culture.

The younger generation born after the AIDS crisis now claims they are entering the Post-Gay era, because they feel the conventional gay identity marginalizes rather than liberates them. Gay politics, after all, does not equal gay identity. Gay identity seems to gradually lose touch with its natural/social surroundings, while it leans more and more toward a self-absorbed political agenda, or the assimilation into the so-called “mainstream.” Advertisements and entertainments from the mainstream with homosexual themes are increasingly visible in most big cities and on major media. More gay couples begin moving into gay-friendly suburban neighborhoods. It is debatable whether this kind of assimilation is after all another form of heterosexual hegemony. The grit of the reality is: do we now see more gays and lesbians feeling comfortable and safe to come out of the closet?

Escoffier continues to comment that “a community of ‘authentic’ and exclusive homosexual selves requires a kind of closure that insulates community members from ties and loyalties to people outside the community.”(18) His remark predicates the impossibility of a centralized
gay movement, and furthermore, underscores the necessity of considering the closet for both its “interior” and “exterior,” its “inclusions” and “exclusions.” While one escapes the exclusion, denial and erasure by the hetero-normative domination, he/she is simultaneously out of the closet and into another possible closet imposed by his/her kind. Frank Browning makes a furious but relevant remark: “Toward what are we coming out? What is the object of this flourishing ideology of ‘outness’? Does it speak only to our short-term appetite for self-declaration, or is ‘outness’ a dialectical journey, a path toward becoming?”

The significance of “becoming,” either by Browning’s journey-toward-outness imagery, or by Deleuze’s “repetition with a difference” philosophy, highlights a dilemma that all identity politics are forced to face. As often found in race-related matters, what appeals to one minority group may impinge on the interest of another ethnic community. Even within the same circle, contradictions are inevitable. Is the feminist ideal innately Western which excludes the Third-World women’s plights? Is Pop Jazz music bearing the black name, or is it a sell-out to the white people? How do African-American activists react to their gay brothers and sisters?

Difference, according to Deleuze, is a result of territorialization. In becoming, one is deterritorialized. He notes in *Difference and Repetition*, there are two kinds of repetition: the static, “reterritorializing” of repetition-as-representation; and the dynamic, “deterritorializing” of *repetition with a difference* (24). Nealon follows the argument by Deleuze and his co-author Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* and expounds it: “In other words, when difference is thematized as a ‘concept in general’, it loses its ‘deterritorializing’ power of becoming. When
difference becomes a theme…it loses its critical force to change or disrupt, to become-other.”(119) The effort of this research to remove “the closet” from the discussion of a thematized concept can not be more clearly echoed. We have to recognize the closet’s potentials to become an agency of deterritorializing. The concept of difference is different from a conceptual difference.

Deleuze’s faith in deterritorialization collides with Butler’s concept of performativity here. Both are working toward eroding the rigidity and normalcy of thematized, conceptualized contexts. As Butler uses gender as the platform to emphasize “performing,” Deleuze regards “becoming” as a solution to the conceptual “authenticity” insisted by most minority groups. With the aid from Deleuze, we can now turn Butler’s theory “inside out” for a different objective. Namely, the objective is not just for deconstructing gender norms, but also for disclosing the fixed, normative gay identity, the “homo-norm.”

Once again, the convergence can be best described from the geographical perspective. On the surface, the impulse for achieving authenticity and performing the closet seem contradictory goals. However, in a geographical sense, they are similarly driven by the longing for homes, by the quest for belonging. Whether the gay person remains “in” or decides to “come out” of the closet, he/she eventually needs to be physically and spatially connected to a “place” in the world. The relations of the closet and the homosexual longing articulate a double sense of place, a double geography. To find a place in the world, as well as to locate the closet within oneself, are fundamental to forming one’s gay identity. Only through the geography of the closet can real differences,
from one’s sexual appetite to his/her political agenda, be truly located and given thorough investigations. Although Deleuze does not indicate any practical steps for the “becoming” process, the process can manifest itself through the performance of geographical movements, as the spatial alterations reflect a person’s psychological and philosophical metamorphosis toward “becoming-other.” From the Foucauldian perspective, combining “performing the closet” and “becoming gay” develops “possibilities” that relate new factors to the identification structure in gay culture. The geography of the closet, in both theoretical and empirical senses, will result in the mappings of a series of concepts of difference “in becoming.”

White’s performative closet is no less than his first step toward the performative geography of becoming and deterritorializing. His identity was formed both within and outside the closet, as he gradually inscribed those concepts of difference into a new geography of the closet. For him, the gay liberation of the seventies was “reterritorialization” rather than “detrerritorialization.” He was more “interested in witnessing an end to racism, sexism, the exploitation of workers and other social inequities.” *(Desire*, 335) His tireless, continuing efforts to imagine what it means to be gay in different times and places demonstrate the art of “becoming gay.” It was an ongoing process of coming out—to his sexuality, to readers from different cultures and the changing literary criticism of gay literature. If *States of Desire* marks his first stage of “becoming gay” through a performative geography of the closet, the autobiographical novels of his coming-out memories is the second becoming. The ongoing self-creation continued after he moved to Paris. Nevertheless, the most striking factor that launched his next stage of becoming during this period was the
rampage of AIDS crisis. Not only was White diagnosed as HIV-positive, but also most of his literary friends in New York were dead from the disease.

A new geography of Gay America in a devastated state waited to be re-written. However, White finished the third volume of his autobiographical novel *The Farewell Symphony*, a tribute to a recent but already lost reality of the 1970’s New York gay culture. In this novel, he delivered his most explicit and graphic descriptions of gay sex so far. Although this novel is “Proustian” for his meditation on the lost time, the most conspicuous aspect of it is still White’s geography of the community with which he had been intimately involved. When commenting on the book, Stephen Barker writes: “In its evocation of the gay community of 1970s New York, *The Farewell Symphony* presents a compelling portrait of the city itself, as well as of its venues for sex, with their dark, hallucinatory interior.” (293) But, in the meantime, White’s unapologetic attitude toward promiscuous sex---in the novel as well as in his personal life---made many wonder if he was politically insensitive to the AIDS crisis.

We need to understand this attitude as the performance of a ritual---a ritual of mourning for the dead, of exorcising the devil of surging gay bashing, the fear and anxiety as the result of AIDS. After all, AIDS changed many gay men’s life, just as gay liberation did at one time. To confront the sickness and death, in a way, was similar to coming out of the closet for many gay men. Similarly the disease advanced the designs of lies, secrecy, concealment and ignorance, around which the geography of the closet had become even more complicated. The narrator in the novel says at one point: “I assume there was going to be a future and that it
could get more and more extravagant. We say gay men as a vanguard that society would inevitably follow.” (*The Farewell Symphony*, 413-14)

Despite his prestige as a writer, White had more than often assumed the role of the Other, whenever he saw the opportunity for resistance rising. He instigated the American literati once with the publications of *The Joy of Gay Sex* and *States of Desire*. With *The Farewell Symphony*, he intended more than a preservation of the lost closet culture of the seventies. As a matter of fact, he needed to confront his HIV-positive condition himself. This time the book became the embodiment of the closet itself for him to “come out” with the truth of his illness to the public.

White also gave his personal response in an interview: “The seventies were a period that had its own direction and would have developed in quite a different way without AIDS. I feel it wasn’t a mistake, that it was a noble experiment—people were trying to get away from the traditional couple toward a community of sexual partners, lovers, friends. An American utopian experiment.” (Hensher, 12-13) As Barker notes, while he wrote the new novel, White developed a conviction of “a total transparency.” It worked toward “unveiling the writer’s means of representing memory and experience, and, at the same time, resulting in a complete revelation of the writer’s own self. This idea of transparency also had another meaning—it referred too to the ghostly transparency White felt in being a writer who was HIV-Positive.” (295)

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7 White began *The Farewell Symphony* soon after he finished his scholarly study of Jean Genet. By years of saturation in Genet’s life and writing, he was very likely influenced by Genet’s self-revelation. He told his interviewer in 1994 that the goal for his new novel was “to confide everything, including the drudgery, the fear of failure. I believe in a total transparency now.” See Thomas Avena’s “Interview with Edmund White,” (222).
White’s political standpoint is dialectical and practical, rather than straightforward and theoretical. Through his journey across America, his migration to Paris, his return to a New York’s literary scene devastated by AIDS, and with his living with his HIV-positive status, White develops and extends homosexual imagination in many domains that no other living writers have treaded. Whereas Sedgwick intends to deconstruct the closet at the expense of the multiplicity and complexity of a total geography of gay culture, Butler succeeds in situating gender in a performative context, but stopping short at investigating the possibility of actual enactments of such performative power in a homosexual context. In Foucault’s case, his invaluable contribution to the discourses on knowledge/power/space ironically deepened the murkiness of his view on his own sexuality, and eventually, resulted in the concealment of his own medical condition of AIDS.

5. Conclusion

The concept of transparency that White has demonstrated (and is still in exploration of it) in many ways connects the gay experiences to a larger world. First, by exposing the closet in a democratic geographical manner, he presents a more diverse and neutral outlook of the closet with both its interiority and exteriority. Secondly, in his autobiographical novels, he displays not only the psychoanalytical but also the aesthetic perspectives on the closet through a performative geography, which includes to revisit those places in his writing and imagination, to trace the contour of his longing and desire for “the outsideness,” and finally to allow the features of such geography to describe his identity “in becoming,” instead of
circumscribing the geography from the point of view based on a fixed but perhaps delusional gay identity. Third, to perform the geography of the closet is a ritual for White, as well as for the Other in the gay community—to commemorate, to nurture and to rejuvenate all the pursuits for a better gay life. Any conclusions about what the gay life is are hasty and arbitrary, as White suggests, since most of them are still “utopian experiments.”

The geographical dimensions to the closet are solid and imaginative at the same time, expressing a “non-hierarchialising” order of things, and allowing homosexuality an “ontological weight” and “be seen by virtue of their being.”

How to reveal those spaces and locations—not to the ridicule and exclusion from the society, but to a wider range of networks and positions of belongings—depends on a performative geography that can illuminate the material, theoretical and empirical aspects of the closet. Where do gay people belong? The question can not be answered, unless we take into account those who still live in culturally uninformed, economically disadvantaged areas, those who struggle in a medically critical condition, and teach them what to expect of the “outside” from a progressive perspective of the closet. Otherwise, the outside brings them nothing but a limbo of deviant context produced by both homosexual and

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8 See Foucault’s *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel* (106-107). In appreciation of Roussel’s painting *La Vue*, Foucault reflects on the artist’s “geographical descriptions” that eliminate “the distance” of language from things: “There is no privileged point around which the landscape will be organized and with distance vanish little by little; rather there’s a whole series of small spatial cells of similar dimensions placed right next to each other without consideration of reciprocal proportion.” Although the phrases are borrowed and transplanted, they illustrate some important ideas of geography that should be recognized and cited here.
This research aims to regenerate interests in re-examining the closet in order to keep the discourses open and alive, instead of being enveloped and buried by the declaration of Post-Gay mentality. However, the effort is inevitably incomplete in its scope and perspective. After all, to locate, perform and re-engineer the geography of the closet is only one of the many ways to advance discourses on gay identity and other important issues concerning power and knowledge. After *The Farewell Symphony*, White has published a few more books on his love life in Paris and his loss of his boyfriend to AIDS. A further look into the different gay cultures in America and France would be also valuable to the study of the geography of the closet. At this point, however, my main focus is on why and how the necessity and possibility of geographical modes and frameworks can re-engineer the investigation of the closet. Perhaps the process of “becoming” can explain why this study is in its present state.

**Works Cited**


從現身到安身—同志櫥櫃地理研究的定位、操演、與活化

提要

本文著眼於當前同志論述中，有關地理學研究方法之採用僅限於慾望的地圖化，因而想指出更根本迫切的問題所在：如何能藉由地理學觀念，對目前同志文化中的認同結構做出修正與新建構？其研究的主旨欲在於探勘潛藏於所謂同志櫥櫃地理下的操演型權力，並於此新架構中申論同志現身（出櫃）的多樣意涵。在此研究主題下，本文重新討論了相關重要理論，包括賽菊寇的櫥櫃知識論、芭特樂的性別操演、德勒茲的變向說，以及傅柯的空間地理概念，尤其是美國同志文學代表性人物艾德蒙懷特的作品與其生平更具研究價值。除了呈現同志身份與同志地景間充滿張力、弔詭、掌控、斷裂的種種面貌外，本研究更提醒經驗性、理論化兼具之櫥櫃地理重塑，對化解從現身到安身困境之重要性。

關鍵詞: 賽菊寇、性別操演、傅柯、德勒茲、地理學、同志論述、櫥櫃