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THE SEXUAL IMAGINARIUM

A Reappraisal

Karen Tongson and Scott Herring

“*Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration*,” by Kath Weston. *GLQ* 2.3 (1995).

Scott Herring: In anticipation of this brief back-and-forth, we had a preliminary exchange about an article useful to our respective research—the anthropologist Kath Weston’s foundational essay “Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration” (1995). This piece was first published in the second volume of *GLQ* and later reprinted in Weston’s *Long Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science* (1998). A member of *GLQ*’s initial Advisory Board, Weston (1995: 255) had interviewed close to one hundred queer women and men to grasp “the part played by urban/rural contrasts in *constituting* lesbian and gay subjects.” Focusing largely but not exclusively on small-town migrations to San Francisco, this essay coined the phrase “the Great Gay Migration of the 1970s and early 1980s,” an allusion to the Great Migration of African Americans to urban spaces in the twentieth-century United States. Alongside its emphasis on the City by the Bay, however, it also outlined movements to global megalopolises such as New York City and Los Angeles as well as other cities such as Birmingham, Alabama; movements from Caribbean locales such as Puerto Rico; “traveling within a metropolitan area” (ibid.: 268); and treks to Maine. Her ethnographic subjects are a wide-ranging lot, including individuals such as Rose Ellis, an African American lesbian from Virginia, and Simon Suh, a Korean American living in Honolulu. Grounded in cultural anthropology, the piece is also truly interdisciplinary as it announces its findings with aid from social history, the sociology of literature, and media studies. Karen’s book, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries*, refers to it as a “water-shed work,” and that strikes me as exactly right (Tongson 2011: 224). I’d like from

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my end to just state the case that Weston's piece—perhaps unintentionally—inaugurated the subfield of queer rural/regional studies before it named itself as such. It introduced a framework to think through the critical concept of *metronormativity* that Jack Halberstam later coined, and it has had a rich afterlife (309 Google Scholar citations and counting). What still reads fresh to you, Karen, after its publication almost a quarter century ago? What strikes you as lasting about its contribution?

Karen Tongson: First of all, let me say I'm thrilled to be having this conversation with you directly—finally. Even though our work has spoken to each other, and with each other for many years, we've never really had the opportunity to weave our insights together into a single project, so I appreciate this opportunity. One thing that struck me when I revisited Weston's article was its personal, anecdotal tone, which in my memory I had completely sublimated into the case studies. I bring this up because of the way both *Another Country* and *Relocations* come from that same place of situating and locating the self, of narrating the encounter with the gay “imaginarium,” as Weston (1995: 255) so aptly describes it, as the opening gambit for an inquiry into the formation of sexual geographies.

There are several strands of the argument that I feel are central but ultimately lost in “Get Thee to a Big City's” broader incorporation into scholarship about gay geography and sexual cultures. In many respects, the title alone becomes the citational touchstone—the thing that names the desire and trajectory that other works on metronormativity begin with as a premise. But it is truly Weston's notion of the “imaginarium,” which she animates throughout her case studies, that became fundamental to scholarship on queer sexual geographies. Weston effectively argues that there is no material formula for “being” urban or rural, but (as you so beautifully expanded on in *Another Country*) the urban/rural binary itself is the seed for a “gay imaginary” that construes these points of origin and destination as the spatial trajectory for coming out and into a broader gay culture and community (Herring 2010: 260).

I also think it becomes clear throughout the article that that binary is more of an urban/elsewhere binary and less strictly urban and rural, which has always been vital to my work on spaces characterized as “sub” urban. Most of the subjects she interviews, as you noted above, model different styles of migration, be it lateral—between cities like Boston and Philadelphia, or Los Angeles and San Francisco, for example—or more constellated, à la Atsuko Ito's story (she moves from Tokyo to a Japanese alpine commune, to “women's land” in Oregon, to the Bay Area) (Weston 1995: 255). Nevertheless, even in my work that strove to leave

behind that constitutive binary to seek queer imaginaries elsewhere, I felt compelled to begin with the premise of a compulsory gay migration to “somewhere else,” which is something that I believe this article crystallized for us.

Another influential thread from Weston, which I also see running through both of our projects on queer space, is her discussion of books, movies, TV shows—essentially all *media* objects, or at least the tools for mediation. These media are what forge the Andersonian “imagined community” that Weston transposes into a descriptor for gay life and culture—or the “imagined *gay* community” (ibid.: 257; emphasis added). Her anecdote about nervously checking out Violette Leduc’s steamy boarding-school romance *Thérèse et Isabelle* from the library inaugurates her own discovery of this spatial and sexual orientation. As she writes: “This common mode of ‘discovering’ the gay imaginary depends upon access to print, television and other media. Getting beyond the family dictionary or the television set that projects directly into the privatized realm of the home requires access to facilities such as libraries, bookstores, and movie theaters that disseminate gay-related materials” (ibid.: 259). I credit this part of Weston’s essay for leading me to the concept of remote intimacy in *Relocations*, even though my own queer suburban imaginary has to assemble itself through the media one can access from *within* the privatized realm of the home, in addition to the other sites she named (Tongson 2011: 27). Of course those platforms for mediation have changed with shifting technologies, and these historical transformations to media mark many of my own efforts to conceptualize certain queer spatial imaginaries.

I think Weston’s account of media and discourse networks also anticipates the richness of your own print and media archive in *Another Country*. Am I purely projecting here? Or did you also find that her descriptors of the “imagined gay community” influenced your own efforts to forge a “paper cut politics” (Herring 2010: 23)? What are some of the other aspects of the essay—some that you may have forgotten, but struck you anew upon rereading—that proved most significant to your own approach to queer geographies?

SH: You’ve rightly picked up on a latent influence for one of the interventions I hoped to have made in *Another Country*. With “paper cut politics” I meant to describe a resistance to metronormativity that aggravates its self-seriousness through something like death by a thousand paper cuts. Sometimes just the reminder that queers can and do thrive in a nonmetropolitan space can be enough to cause some unrest. For me, this is frequently a strategy that pops up across literature, film, performance, and photography to chip away at the social pressures of queer urbanity. Your comments are a helpful cue that Weston’s subjects do more

of the same, as she recorded them piecing together lives that don't fit metronormative molds. These persons are spatial theorists in their own right as they engage in what *Relocations* refers to as "an ethos of 'making do'—a special alchemy of making something out of nothing" (Tongson 2011: 105). Making do and paper-cut politics strike me as even more urgent to recognize and facilitate now as they have ever been.

These strategies are, of course, never stress-free undertakings, and this acknowledgment brings me to another point about Weston's essay that I see in hindsight thanks to your nudging. Weston (1995: 255) refers to one of Ito's migrations as "a disillusioning sojourn," and I'm struck again by how bittersweet these movements often felt, as interviewees grapple with finding their "way to"—and "away from"—urbanity (ibid.: 268). Weston calls this feeling "a kind of anti-identification" (ibid.: 269), one that proved extremely productive for queers who attempted their elsewhere as best they could. Words like *disillusionment* and *dislocation* course through the article, and I attempted to document some of that sting in *Another Country*. It's an enduring question for many of us: what happens when you let go of geographic FOMO? I remind myself that you get at something like this with the emphasis of *Relocations* on nostalgia within the dyke-aspora.

Paying tribute to Weston with you has been a real pleasure and a reminder that *GLQ* has been advancing this work since its earliest years. A parting question prompted by your reference to shifts in new media: in ways that Weston could not have foreseen, what else has unexpectedly changed (for the better or for the worse) alongside such innovations since her article's publication in 1995? For me, one thing that stands out is potentially easier access to queer travel thanks to an increase in transregional aircraft over the past few decades. I'm a terrible flyer but truly grateful I can puddle-jump from Indianapolis to the southeastern United States in less than two hours. Yourself?

KT: I'm so glad you brought up the melancholic elements of "Get Thee," because I think a lot of us forget that it lands really hard—or better yet, *settles into*—these feelings of disillusionment and disappointment in a way that anticipates, and makes possible, letting go of the "geographic FOMO" you mention above. Fear—not only of missing out as an isolated subject cut off from a queer everyday but also for one's safety, as many have argued—becomes the implicit precondition for the gay migratory impulse. As Weston points out, the fundamental whiteness and maleness of the "gay imaginary" is subsumed by the mere promise of its gayness for many of the subjects she interviews. I'm struck, in particular, by Simon Suh's and Tyrone

Douglas's case studies. Even in a place like Honolulu, Suh's gay milieu is, in his words, "not-me" (Weston 1995: 272), that is, predominantly white and not Korean American. Douglas, meanwhile, cannot move with ease across the thresholds of racial segregation in Philadelphia, which becomes apparent when he tries to enter his first gay bar, and he's harassed for additional ID, even though his white friends are waved right in.

In hindsight, *Relocations* started from this place of disillusionment, with the premise that queer people of color are acutely alienated from a gay mainstream, or a national gay imaginary. Even the ease with which JJ Chinois moves across the country in Lynne Chan's parodic online narrative is facilitated by a certain naïveté—by his failure to realize he's actually missing out on anything, anywhere. JJ brings the party wherever he goes. His cocksure cluelessness (attributable to his putative "foreignness," and lack of awareness about the decorum of everyday life in the United States) makes it so that he *is* the party. The "where" becomes purely incidental.

It's actually funny to think back on how Chan's JJ Chinois project was a rudimentary, early Internet experiment that was at the same time skewering the utopianism of the "World Wide Web," and the different modalities of mobility it promised to isolated queer subjects. In fact, JJ's narrative is structured like a social media "story," and it anticipates how such self-representation is tremendously vulnerable to unreliable narration and fluffing. Weston's books, magazines, movies, and even television shows seem quaint and more reliable by comparison.

To answer your last question, I think "Get Thee" didn't quite anticipate Web 1.0, let alone all the subsequent platforms and apps available not only for LGBT+ *representation* (on networks like OpenTV or on auto-documentation sites like YouTube, etc.) but for the actual mapping, tracking, and enumeration of queer bodies. As everyone knows, wherever you are, you can log into Grindr or any one of a number of apps to reassure yourself that you are "not alone," because your Subway sandwich artist, a mere two feet away, is also pulsatingly gay on the same map.

Of course, these technologies and platforms primarily evolved in the service of gay men, so lesbians and many queer people of color are networked in other ways, some of which still has to transpire off the grid. In this way, our networked lives mimic the segregations and spatial privileges that inhere in "meat space," as they call it, even if we ostensibly have access to more people, and other conversations.

By way of parting, I want to acknowledge the remoteness and the intimacy of our exchange here. It's been fun writing back and forth, even though I don't

think we've laid eyes on each other in person in at least two or three years. I also want to thank you for the intellectual companionship in the "sexual geographies" universe. Even though we've both turned our focus to other topics, I think our research on spatial imaginaries informs all the work we have since undertaken.

Between 2013 and 2016, there was a premature sense that discussions of queer geographies, regionalisms, and migrations were "over," and that we'd all moved on to other material (or rather, to other materialisms). What has become increasingly apparent in the last two years, especially after the shock of November 2016 to so many in the United States, is how much *more* relevant and salient work on queerness, regionalism, and migration has actually become. As Weston (1995: 275) writes at the end of "Get Thee to a Big City," "homelands can be easier to desire from a distance than once you arrive on their figurative shores."

It's a good thing we still haven't found home yet.

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