

Sounds of Home

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Blog post published June 3, 2010 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/hhy46-h2f06>

Abstract

Last month, I braved hail, snow, and just about every kind of plague-like spring weather to hear Karen Tongson's talk at Cornell about her soon-to-be-released book, *Relocations: Emergent Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (NYU Press's Sexual Cultures Series). Karen's project remaps U.S. suburban spaces as brown, immigrant, and queer, thus relocating the foundations of both queer studies [...]

Keywords

Music (Subfield), LGBTQ Health, Identity, and Policy (Topic), Social Psychology (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Gender, Identity, Listening

Recommended citation

Stoever, J. (2010, June 3). Sounds of Home. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/hhy46-h2f06>

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Last month, I braved hail, snow, and just about every kind of plague-like spring weather to hear [Karen Tongson's](#) talk at Cornell about her soon-to-be-released book, *Relocations: Emergent Queer Suburban Imaginaries* ([NYU Press's Sexual Cultures Series](#)). Karen's project remaps U.S. suburban spaces as brown, immigrant, and queer, thus relocating the foundations of both queer studies and urban studies. While not a part of the "dykeaspora" of color that Karen deftly details, I am in solidarity with the lives she traces and the soundscapes she amplifies more passionately than [Lloyd Dobler with his boom box](#).



After all, Karen and I grew up together in the dusty, palm-tree lined streets of Riverside, California, meeting at Sierra Middle School and plotting our way the hell out of Dodge. . .only to later realize that our mutual plottings were really survivings—and a hell of a lot of fun—and the Riv—with its [raincrosses](#) and dry riverbeds, lifted trucks and low riders—would stay with us wherever we went.

Since leaving Ithaca—Karen's voice still warm in my ears like it used to be when tying up our parent's pre-call-waiting phone lines—I haven't been able to stop thinking about the way in which *Relocations* also reimagines the power of music. For Karen, music can help us know and love who we are more deeply, to enable us to "make do" with what we have been given in a way that liberates rather than incarcerates. Music is not just about "the differences it makes audible" (as Josh Kun writes in [Audiotopia](#)) but also, as Karen argues, about the ways in which sound gives us back to ourselves.

For example, a song that is spliced into Karen and I's mutual musical DNA is "There is a Light that Never Goes Out" by The Smiths, (from 1986's *The Queen is Dead*). Its various revolutions—both on turntables and in life choices—have affected us profoundly. In "[The Light that Never Goes Out: Butch Intimacies and Sub-Urban Socialibilities in 'Lesser Los Angeles,'](#)" Karen uses the song as an affective touchstone for the ways in which sound can create "queer sociability, affinity, and intimacy" (355) while providing sonic moments of "self- and mutual-discovery" (360) and mediating relationships of place, power, pleasure, and privilege.

<https://youtu.be/DRTW1MAZ32M>

Karen's ideas have since helped me understand why I used to listen to the song over and over in my lonely yet womb-like suburban bedroom, as if it were revelation and incantation. As I struggled with issues—identity and otherwise—Morrissey's silken voice had the power to sound

out the shape of my most secret wounds and simultaneously soothe them. Although I now know I am not alone in this, I thought I was back then, alone and waiting for someone to:

“Take me out tonight
where there’s music and there’s people
who are young and alive.”

In a now slightly-embarrassing Anglophilic phase—this was also around the time I was reading [The Adrian Mole Diaries](#), watching *My Fair Lady* with Karen, and exchanging mixtapes with my British penpal—the Smiths were part and parcel of an England that I imagined as a long lost home. The U.K.’s pop cultural exports made it seem so much more tolerant of misfits of all kinds, let alone more temperate than SoCal for black turtlenecks and Doc Martens. At the time, I thought I was listening to difference—to the most remote space imaginable from the sweltering hothouse of Riverside—but Karen’s work reveals that I was really hearing the maudlin voice of my own longing, the jangly chords of my own desire, the oddball rhythms of my own heart.

I finally got myself to the actual England years later, thanks to the wonders of credit-card leveraged conferencing in destination locations. After the [conference](#)—at which I was, ironically, presenting on Los Angeles—I had the pleasure of spending a damp, foggy day record-shopping my way through brick-bound Nottingham. While I was gleefully flipping through velvety fields of plastic covers and comparing American imports with their UK counterparts, “There is a Light that Never Goes Out” came on the shop’s PA. With the first flare of guitar, I looked up from the record bins, startled by the warm recognition I felt at the sound of “home.”

At the time, I remember thinking that my thirteen-year-old self would be totally geeked out. However, I harbor little nostalgia for the volatile claustrophobia of my lonely tweenhood. Karen would describe my flash of recognition as “remote intimacy,” an asynchronous experience of popular culture across virtual networks of desire, a way of [“imagining our own spaces in connection with others.”](#)

Singing along for the thousandth time to Morrissey’s bittersweet grain, I realized that I wasn’t listening to my past in that record shop, but rather my thirteen-year-old self had been hearing the future in her bedroom. Dreaming of England had given her a way to grapple with the pains that ultimately produced my deepest longings: to overcome the “strange fears that gripped” me, to one day be able take *myself* “anywhere, anywhere,” and to feel the “light” of a love that would “never go out.”



It had taken a 5500 mile plane ride for me to realize that “home” was, in fact, a feeling of arrival rather than site of destination . . .and I couldn’t wait to get back to L.A. to give my homegirl Karen a call.

“There is a light that never goes out

There is a light that never goes out

There is a light that never goes out

There is a light and it never goes out. . .”

JSA

