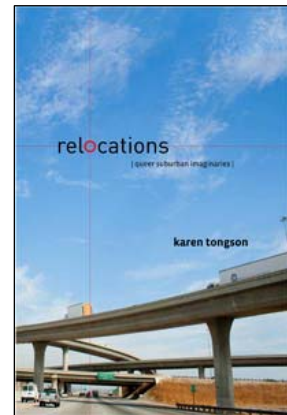


Karen Tongson, **Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries (Sexual Cultures)**, New York: New York University Press, 2011, 320 pp., \$22.80 (paperback).

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Relocations is luminous, hilarious, rigorous, and profoundly moving. Tongson turns the tables on the critical commonplace that the U.S suburbs have been and will always be spaces of stultifying sameness. Challenging this truism of racial, sexual, and socioeconomic normativity, her necessary book finds that these geographies have been made critical by the very bodies and voices that the suburbs are thought to exclude—queers of color, migrants, immigrants, and the working classes. This claim is at once historical and theoretical, as she takes the suburbs of Southern California to be her case study. Examining the emergence of the amusement park, the strip mall, the freeway system, the slow crawl of British and American empire, and the local and global flows of bodies across the long 20th and early 21st centuries, she essentially rewrites the history of Los Angeles and its surrounding suburban locales.



In fact, she deconstructs the idea of the history of Los Angeles by privileging those queer spaces—Riverside, Buena Park, Orange County, San Bernardino, and others—that too often take a back seat to any overview of the City of Angels. Simultaneously, she crafts a rich theoretical discourse for thinking about how queers of various colors, ethnicities, classes, and genders have forged new social and erotic relations via “remote intimacies” (p. 24) and a “transculturation” (p. 84)—the former term borrowed from Jennifer Terry, the latter from Fernando Ortiz—that operate within and beyond model minority identification. In so doing, Tongson launches a razor-sharp critique against queer cosmopolitanism, urban and urbane gentrification, and anyone who has ever looked askance at a row of K-Mart shopping carts. She pays deep tribute to culturally neglected spaces and persons, and she reinvents how we might approach the global city and its attached environs. There is also something to be said for a work that can deftly analyze a Playboy Bunny pendant in one chapter and the dominance of West Coast Victoriana in the next.

To accomplish these ambitious tasks, Tongson focuses on how the “queer of color suburban imaginary” has been charted in postindustrial Southern California (p. 2). These suburbs *de refusé* are tracked across five tightly stitched chapters and a coda that each offers up novel readings of queer transnationalism and regionalism. After laying out her methodology, her theory, and her critical traditions in her first chapter, she then turns to performance artist Lynne Chan to trace how Chan’s online alter ego, JJ Chinois, troubles conventional notions of queer diaspora and queer migration. Detailing Chan’s escapades, from Southern California to her appearance at the largely working-class Skowhegan State Fair in the state of Maine (pp. 61–67), Tongson presents an important critique of urban-oriented historical scholarship, as well as of prevalent notions of “authentic” racial identification. In her third chapter, which

incorporates original archival material, she turns to Orange County to investigate the queer of color spaces that were carved out of Studio K at Knott's Berry Farm theme park in the early 1980s. Again, her argument here is succinctly and cleverly supported through personal interviews, newspapers, and transnational studies: Studio K, she finds, enabled classed and immigrant bodies in Reagan-era suburbia to coalesce rather than to disperse. Moving from the early 20th century to the present, Chapter Four offers a tour-de-force depiction of Riverside's codependent relation to empire, as it also highlights Alex Espinoza's recent queer Latino fictions based in this geography. Mapping colonial legacies in Espinoza's work (and in the too-much-maligned strip mall), Tongson suggests that phantasmatic spaces such as the ghost town of Agua Mansa hold keys for unlocking the microhistories of global movements. Coming full circle to the performance of Chan that began her study, her last chapter turns to the performance group Butchlalis de Panochtitlan (BdP). It examines "the 'pre-history' of urban gentrification" and the artistic counters to this shift made by queer of color women (p. 191). As it focuses on the production of the coauthored 2008 play, *The Barber of East L.A.*, this chapter transforms citizens from a region dismissed as "Lesser Los Angeles" into queer memory-makers as they perform stories of "brown butch desire" that record a violent 1980 riot at The Vex, an East L.A. nightclub (p. 184). As a whole, these chapters present a rich archive for feeling suburban and queer of color in early 21st century America. As each section documents "transnational suburban hubs" (p. 26), Tongson's writing reinvigorates stale notions of provincialism, cosmopolitanism, metronormativity, and urbanized lesbian and gay studies—and sister cities.

I want to stress how pleurably disoriented I was by this book. Line by line, chapter by chapter, *Relocations* defamiliarizes Los Angeles. After an encounter with this writing, readers will see this city—or any city, for that matter—in a different light, and I now approach a cloverleaf and a commute with new eyes. Over the course of its multilayered argument, the book attends to Goths, gangstas, B-boys, Chicana butches, homothugs, Chinese-American drag performers, Filipina musicians, working-class whites, club kids, break dancers, Morrissey fans, Mexican migrants, and early-career Gwen Stefani. It pays critical homage to these cultural workers who are often forgotten in metronormative studies of American cities, and it departs from the standard scripts of queer studies that privilege the metropolis as the primary center of political engagement. It takes its place alongside both Martin Manalansan's *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* and Victor Bascara's *Model-Minority Imperialism*, and it makes vital contributions to queer/of color studies, urban studies, migration studies, cultural studies, performance studies, sonic studies, new media studies, critical race studies, and, last but not least, studies of Los Angeles.

As it does so, *Relocations* makes good on a promise that has always been inherent in the queer studies that many of us strive to do. I am reminded of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1997) desire for queer scholarship to be "ameliorative" toward its found objects, to chart not just the injustices that normativity inflicts but also to salvage these historical wounds (p. 22). *Relocations* concludes its last chapter with a riff on Sedgwick's wish when it claims that "wounds so deep rarely ever heal properly, but perhaps they are, in the end, in the service of other mutations and beautiful pretences" (p. 202). Another term for these "mutations," I think, is the Southern California queer of color imaginary. Repeatedly, *Relocations* practices ameliorative criticism as it reveals sexual, racial, and regional minorities "making do" with the damages of capital, race, urbanity, and aesthetic violence (p. 105). In Tongson's typically apt phrasing, they "make something out of nothing," and they make worlds new (p. 105). So, too, does this book, which mutates

into critique, poetry, memoir, and thick history (often in a single sentence). It reaches toward the horizon of American studies, and it dazzles.

References

Sedgwick, E. K. (1997). Paranoid reading and reparative reading; Or, you're so paranoid, you probably think this introduction is about you. In E. K. Sedgwick (Ed.), *Novel gazing: Queer readings in fiction* (pp. 1–37). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.