



© 2019 by the author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

**Citation:** Kelaita, P. 2019. Corny Matters. *Cultural Studies Review*, 25:2, 333-336. <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v25i2.6893>

ISSN 1837-8692 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj>

BOOK REVIEW

## Corny Matters

**Paul Kelaita**

University of Sydney

**Corresponding author:** Paul Kelaita: Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Studies, University of Sydney NSW 2006 Australia. [paul.kelaita@sydney.edu.au](mailto:paul.kelaita@sydney.edu.au)

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v25i2.6893>

**Article history:** Accepted 10/10/2019; Published 22/11/2019

*Why Karen Carpenter Matters*, Karen Tongson.

Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019

ISBN: 978-1-4773-1884-3; Recommended Retail Price \$16.95 (paperback).

To many, Karen Carpenter needs no introduction. One half of the American brother-sister soft rock duo the Carpenters, Karen Carpenter's voice is familiar to all who know their 1970s hits including '(They Long to Be) Close to You', 'We've Only Just Begun', or 'Goodbye to Love', the genre-shifting power ballad that to this day sustains countless karaoke renditions. But Karen Carpenter is also known to many by her death in 1983 from heart failure as result of complications from anorexia nervosa. Beyond her musical legacy, Carpenter's rise amid a family transfixed by the talent of her brother Richard and her tragic death are key parts of the Karen Carpenter story as popularly understood. In Karen Tongson's new book, *Why Karen Carpenter Matters*, all these things are cast in a new light, like a well composed cover.

Appearing in the Music Matters series out of the University of Texas Press, *Why Karen Carpenter Matters* is, if I can risk belabouring the music metaphor, easy listening in book form. A fast and enjoyable read, the book is premised on Karen Tongson's connection to Karen Carpenter. These two Karens, author and musician, are intertwined in ways that illustrate the complex attachments formed around popular culture and biography.

While Karen Carpenter may not need an introduction, Karen Tongson might. A formative voice in recent queer cultural studies, Tongson's academic preoccupations include suburbanness and the normativity it ostensibly represents, as well as performance cultures and music, especially karaoke as an embodied form that travels and marks place. Tongson's interest in the Carpenters is not only a matter of lifelong fandom but also one of legacy. Born in the Philippines, Karen Tongson was named for Karen Carpenter by her musician parents.

**Declaration of conflicting interest** The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **Funding** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

This namesake relationship proves fertile ground for the excavation of many personal and professional cross-identifications. Remembering her relocation to the US, Tongson excavates family myths, facts, and quirks of both Karen-clans. *Why Karen Carpenter Matters*, as Tongson makes clear, is an account of the sustaining effect one Karen had on another. ‘A good portion of this book is devoted,’ she writes, to ‘exploring why Karen Carpenter matters to me’ (xiii). By weaving together her family history, her enduring love of the Carpenters’ music, and her at times fraught identification with the white-bread fantasy associated with the Carpenter image, Tongson provides an incisive window into the relation between racial projection and normality, using her own investments to tell a more collective story of imperialism, migration, and cultural adaptation.

Bringing not quite biography, not quite social history, and not quite autobiography together, Tongson challenges how we think of the Carpenters, who are usually cast as white and corny, by unpacking the segregated choral history their music develops from. Tongson explores how Karen and Richard’s musical training in the student choir at Cal State Long Beach almost strictly adhered to the white side of what Jennifer Stoeber has called the ‘sonic color line’ where experimental musical styles were framed as white and vernacular music styles as black (51). Later in the book, Tongson picks up this point about musically marked style to argue that Richard’s opposition to Karen’s unsuccessful attempt to make it as an individual artist was tied to both his own self-assured (and family endorsed) narrative as the musical genius of the two and the ‘racialized anxiety’ around black musical styles (such as disco) and urban spaces (such as New York) (101). Tongson connects this racialisation of sound, and vocalisation in particular, with the story of her own family’s migration from Manila to the suburbs of Southern California. Recalling the longing for the ‘whiteness and promises’ of perfection and prosperity captured in the Carpenters’ trademark sound, Tongson speaks to her own queer attachment to Karen: ‘Straight as she seemed, again, in all senses of the word, Karen was the original coordinate for my queerness’ (121, 101). In this way, Tongson deepens current accounts of celebrity attachment by thinking about emplacement and transnational appeal. By merging personal and collective narratives, Tongson pushes against the critical convention that positions the enduring popularity of the Carpenters in the Philippines as American soft power:

*While the Carpenters mania that seems to exist in perpetuity in the Philippines might be easily (and to a certain extent, rightfully) construed as yet another of the many vestiges of the nation’s colonial entanglements with the United States ... I would argue that there is a power relationship more difficult to parse, a different dynamic, another species of intimacy between Karen and my people, Karen and me. You see, Karen and the Carpenters belong to us, not the other way around. (122-123)*

By troubling the relationship between owner and origin, Tongson recasts established accounts of colonialism and identification in more lively terms. Some attachments may be corny, but no less powerful for that. As she is the first to avow, circuits of taste, including musical taste, mark people and places in unpredictable ways, such as the way in which her nursed love of the Carpenters marked her as out of place in the Southern California suburban bedroom their music was meant to typify (73).

Tongson’s lived interest in how the Carpenters’ music relates to class, race, place, taste, and the enactments of norms particular to each, is refreshingly free of theoretical baggage and suitably laced with a rich sense of musicology, which she inherits from her family. Tongson’s unashamedly personal description of her grandparents and their social and musical lives, her

attention to her mother's singing career, as well as the family narrative that insists her mother sounds like her daughter's namesake, suggests the quality of a shared fantasy. A case in point: for a brief time, Tongson's maternal grandfather and his band played Las Vegas at the same time as the Carpenters. Tongson wonders if, given his daughter's love of the Carpenters' music, he would have noted the serendipity before musing that 'as with most things having to do with this charming man, his attentiveness to his daughter's interests, especially from half a world away, is likelier to have flourished in fantasy than in reality' (8). The fantasy of attachment is not restricted to pop culture but infuses all relationships, even those that seem to elude such capture. Fantasy, then, is not only about celebrity longing but familial longing too, about how stories of ourselves are not altogether ours or ever given appropriate value.

In the most experimental chapter in the book, Tongson intersperses her 'jukebox musical' romance fan-fiction expanding the story between childhood friends Karen Carpenter and Frankie Chavez, the boy who taught her how to play the drums (26). Fact converges with fiction in a form more tangible to suggest that memory, attachment, and longing blur together. Later, Tongson considers how Carpenter's body, gender, and eventual death have been collectively imagined. People will respond differently to Tongson's speculation around Carpenter's anorexia and the suggestion that it was linked to a drive to unsex her body (82-84). Tongson identifies Karen Carpenter's youthful tomboyishness and later androgyny and connects it to 'the most frequently asked question' of her own life: 'are you a boy or a girl?' (84). Where Tongson's mother resented the question asked of *her* about Karen—'Girl or boy?' (85)—she herself achieved more socially accepted forms of femininity but also encountered the gendered assumption that her brother and male cousins were the real inheritors of the musicality passed down by her father and uncles (88). The gendering of musical genius within the family is also an integral part of the Carpenters' story with Richard being 'cocksure' about his own talent and privately assured by his parents that 'it was supposed to be about him' (118, 38). Karen was the drummer-who-sings, reluctantly pulled from behind the drums and placed centre stage when their career took off. Critical attention to personal affinities grounded in the biographies of both Karens connects and deepens these otherwise separate threads.

Given the importance placed on individual narratives of attachment throughout, I feel a confession is necessary: I'm not a Karen Carpenter fan though less certainly so than when I began the book. What drew me to this book was that other, slightly less well-known, Karen. Tongson's work on suburban Los Angeles and the cultural and social forms that animate suburban queer of colour lives proved foundational to my own work on the queer and artworld contexts of suburban Sydney. I must also admit that I am not a very musical person. I am much more visual. While no images appear in the book, the Carpenters generated a vast visual archive: music videos, photographs, posters, documentaries, performances, places, album covers, and logos. One image in particular captures my imagination: Tongson describes a photograph of Karen taken on tour in 1975, playing a snare drum centre stage and wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the words 'LEAD SISTER' (30). Tongson describes how 'Richard explained in an online chat with fans, [that] a Japanese magazine had mistakenly translated the word *singer* as *sister* ... Karen thought it was hilarious and had the T-shirt made' (30-31). For Tongson, 'the joke behind the term *lead sister* is a cruel one, insofar as it reveals a pointed and painful truth about Karen Carpenter: she was the lead, the star, yet she was defined, both in public and in private, by her relationship to her brother' (31). But this is not the only generative mistranslation in the book. Tongson titles her opening chapter 'Whiteness and Promises', a serendipitous mistranslation she found on a Filipino karaoke machine that should have read 'white lace and promises' from the Carpenters' superhit 'We've Only Just Begun'

---

(5). Innocuous but charged translation is also evident in a Tonight Show interview in 1978 where Carpenter gives a brief rendition of their song ‘Sing a Song’ in Japanese, after which she flashes a winning smile and stands for a bow. This is lead sister meets whiteness and promises: a practiced and safe performance for a perceived domestic audience. Fortunately, the kind of cultural studies practiced here, the story that Tongson tells, accommodates cultural difference as a central part of the narrative, rather than merely an object on the critical and consumer outskirts. The many queer encounters that animate this book capitalise on Tongson’s attachment to and affection for Carpenter to compellingly sharpen ‘the placeness of a place’ and of a sound (124).