



The Queer Foundation Scholar

Publication of the Queer Foundation

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“I have a story that needs to be told: *Tangerine*, storytelling, and public space

By **Grace Owen**
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The 2015 film *Tangerine*, directed by Sean Baker and starring Mya Taylor and Kiki Rodriguez, was born of Sean Baker's idea of exploring the intersection of Santa Monica and Highland in L.A., as well as ensuing conversations and collaborations with Taylor and Rodriguez. Mya Taylor and Kiki Rodriguez have been interviewed extensively to discuss their experiences, which were vital to the construction of the film. Baker describes the film as social realist, appropriating the art term associated with the Ashcan school of American artists to describe a focus on portraying quotidian realities of society. He also wanted to deeply probe the experiences and images of Santa Monica and Highland. The result is a gorgeous, moving, impactful film that is most of all witty, something that Taylor was insistent on throughout the production process. This film focuses on sex workers and specifically sex workers who are transgender women of color. In this way the film speaks to the intersectionality and overlapping identities that are intrinsic to the lived

experiences of trans women but which are often absent from academia in queer studies and transgender studies. By comparing and contrasting queer theory, transgender experience, and cinematic qualities, I hope to establish *Tangerine* as a film that highlights and saturates the experiences of trans women of color in the sex work industry – both emotionally and through an academic lens.

Transmisogynoir comes from misogynoir, a word coined by Moya Bailey, a Black queer feminist scholar. Transmisogynoir is a portmanteau of a portmanteau: it is the specific institutional oppression faced by Black trans women. Bailey's academic work focuses on how media impacts the experiences of Black women in a white supremacist patriarchy. Bailey coined the term misogynoir while teaching at Emory University and writing for Crunk Feminist Collective, and she describes the word as necessary to “describe the particular fuckery that Black women face in popular culture.” The media connotation that Bailey asserts the word

has is relevant to the discussion of *Tangerine*. Anti-blackness in Western and specifically US media takes many forms; transmisogyny is also prevalent. In both forms of media-related verbal violence, humor is often a component. Black women, trans women, and Black trans women are often the butt of jokes made at their expense. Verbal violence is a form of violence; offensive jokes are offences committed against a marginalized group. For Black trans women, representation is a pressing issue, especially when transphobic violence in part occurs because there is no representation or humanization of trans people. Susan Stryker, a trans studies scholar, describes transphobia as “a primordial fear of monstrosity, or loss of humanness” because it is difficult for cisgender people to “recogniz[e] the humanity of another person if they cannot recognize that person’s gender.” If there is no representation of trans people except as monstrosities (tropes of trans people “tricking” sexual partners come to mind), then there is a necessarily limited understanding of who or what trans people really are. In a media-saturated society, TV and film are primary sources of images and information. Media representation is therefore vital to fight against the dehumanization of Black trans women.

In *Tangerine* specifically, two trans women of color are actually played by trans women of color. Further, two sex workers are played by two women who have done sex work. This happens so rarely in popular media, especially in mainstream film, that it was a cause célèbre not to have a cis man in a wig and makeup playing these characters and further dehumanizing them. Beyond this, in regards to transmisogynoir in the media, there are two important components to note in the film and its production process. First is the focus on humor and wit in difficult situations. Racist, misogynistic, and transphobic humor is saturated throughout media: the reliance on dehumanizing stereotypes has not ceased just because there are occasional instances of representation or the media discussion of the “transgender moment,” a term which decontextualizes the activism that trans communities have been doing for such a long time. To have a film that is so realist and yet so

witty was a priority for Taylor, who impressed this on Baker. In a Q&A session after a screening of the film, Taylor said,

A lot of the people [women working on Santa Monica who were involved in the film or who knew Taylor and Rodriguez] they’re really proud of the film because it does show, you know, what really really happens, what it is like to live in the life of a trans person on Santa Monica and Highland – because I can say every transgender person does not do sex work, let’s just get that straight, not every transgender person you saw in the movie does sex work...it’s telling the truth about everything but it’s also humorous at the same time.

Baker seconds Taylor’s comments by describing his creative process and realizing that it was vital to maintain the humor and wit with which the women working on Santa Monica approached life. In *Tangerine*, a mainstream film audience sees wit coming from the mouths and brains of trans women, especially trans women of color who are sex workers, instead of jokes being made at the expense of their bodies. The importance of this, I think, cannot be overstated.

Another important component of the plot of this film as well as its inception and production is sex work and sex workers. Baker was living near Santa Monica in L.A. and was interested in the space. He wanted to know why more stories hadn’t been told about this area, given the street’s proximity to Hollywood and West Hollywood. Baker approached Taylor outside the LGBT center on Santa Monica and asked her for more information about the area; he and Chris Bergoch, who co-wrote the script, immediately knew that she was going to be instrumental in their project. After sitting with Taylor and her friends and others from the neighborhood for several days and listening to their stories and jokes, Baker and Bergoch began to write the script. Baker said:

I wanted to tell a story about Santa Monica and Highland – I knew it would involve sex

work...we're two cisgender white guys from outside that world so we did not in any way want to go in there with a script...the only thing I knew that there would be a climactic confrontation in *Donut Time*...we gave the treatment to Mya and Kiki to approve.

By working with Taylor and Rodriguez before even creating a treatment for the film, Baker and Bergoch were able to consistently check in with their actresses about what was right, what was true, what was respectful.

Taylor wanted it to be humorous because humor is how she has survived. She said, "I used to be a sex worker but my character is very different from me...I relate to her with humor. Because I've had such a dark life, I want to see happiness...all you have is humor and to try to really uplift yourself." By relying on humor and wit as a strength in dark times, Taylor turns transmisogynistic humor on its head by sharing her own jokes, her own humor, her own coping mechanisms.

The academic realities and ramifications of the sex work industry also impact this film. Survival sex work is often the only option poor trans women of color have to make money, due to institutional roadblocks. Taylor describes this situation:

I did sex work because I couldn't get a job...before my transition, of course, I could I had all kinds of jobs, I had a lot of skills...I filled out applications for 186 jobs in one month, I did 26 interviews in one month, and I did not get one job at all, because my driver's license did not show a girl's name or a girl's gender, because I did not have enough money to get the paperwork done - you have to think about all the people who do not have enough money...trying to transition alone is hard.

Her story is backed up by data from the DC Office of Human Rights. According to their research in *Qualified and Transgender*, "48% of employers appeared to prefer at least one less-qualified candidate perceived as cisgender over a more-qualified application from a candidate perceived as transgender." Sex work is often (perhaps always) degrading and exploitative, but many trans women find that it is the only option

they have, especially when living on the streets. Many conditions lead to sex work being the only option for marginalized trans women: prejudices can lead to homelessness, inconsistent IDs can lead to a lack of financial stability, and financial instability can lead again to homelessness.

Survival sex work often takes place in public spaces, on the streets – such as the streets of LA seen in *Tangerine*. Increased visibility for these trans women leads to an increased risk of violence. In Vivian Namaste's piece on redefining queerbashing – violence directed against visibly non-heterosexual people - as genderbashing, she discusses the "collapse of sexuality and gender." Queerbashing is born, she argues, not from an innate knowledge of the sexuality of the victim, but from their failure to properly conform to gender roles – she says that "an assault on 'transgressive' bodies is fundamentally concerned with policing gender presentation through public and private space." Namaste is interested in how space is gendered. Baker's comments on the inception of the film as well as his style of filming shows that he is interested in public space as well. *Tangerine* is filmed almost entirely on the street. Starting from the opening scene when Rodriguez strides off in search of her cheating boyfriend, there is a sense of power and movement. Another striking scene is when Taylor has left Rodriguez and sits at a bus stop smoking a cigarette. Through a long, motionless take, Taylor interacts with the space around her while lost in her own world. The way that people shape public spaces, and the way that public spaces shape people, is a key motif in the way that *Tangerine* is filmed. An example of gendered space that Namaste cites is prostitutes being referred to as "public" women. The incidence of violence against trans women increases much more when they are in public spaces, which Namaste argues are masculinized spaces because of the patriarchal tradition of women being in the home. Cisgender heterosexual men are concerned with policing public space, which they consider to be theirs, by removing the threat of women who do not conform to gender norms. This includes lesbians and trans women, both of whom can have bodies that are considered transgressive. In this way "the threat of violence polices one's gender

presentation and behavior.” This is seen in the need to pass for trans women, to look like a cisgender woman who is “correctly” performing femininity, which is in many ways motivated by the threat of violence. In *Tangerine*, this is made explicit at the end of the movie. After Taylor and Rodriguez have argued, Rodriguez has a cup of urine thrown at her by someone she thought was a potential client. This story is true – Taylor herself witnessed it happening to another trans sex worker she knew. Taylor takes Rodriguez to the Laundromat in the parking lot in order to take care of her. Rodriguez laments that she can’t afford new hair, and Taylor, after some hesitation, takes off her own wig and gives it to Rodriguez.

The scene in the Laundromat is significant. After Rodriguez is attacked, she breaks down emotionally and starts physically removing all of the feminine signifiers she was wearing. Even though she wore a wig, makeup, and women’s clothing and shoes, including breast inserts, she apparently did not pass “well enough” and was policed. Further, her attackers were clued in that her body was transgressive because the space that she was in is a public space known to be frequented by transgender sex workers.

Here I think it is significant to note that *Tangerine*, based on everything I can find from the mouths (and texts) of Taylor and Rodriguez, was a positive and empowering experience. Taylor discussed wanting to tell her story and being proud of the film, because she was so involved in the story’s telling and creation from the beginning. *Tangerine* is not a story about trans sex workers of color as a nameless, faceless set of statistics. It is a story about two young women trying to get through a day and overcoming these barriers. The barriers are not only personal issues of fidelity, money, and happiness, but also are representative of the institutional oppressions that shape their daily lives. Instead of catering to the idea that the personal is political, *Tangerine* explores how the political is personal. Without once mentioning a larger activist battle or appealing to elitist academic terms, it makes a powerful and moving case for what it is like to

navigate in a world that dehumanizes someone so deeply.

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About the Author.

Grace Owen, a recipient of a 2016-17 Queer Foundation Publications Award, is a sophomore at Wellesley College studying media arts and sciences. She is interested in pursuing media and journalistic applications of new technology. She is also interested in intersectional advocacy and activism in the queer community. She loves dance and theatre as well.

Ms. Owen is passionate about activism within her own community. She has been working with both LGBT-oriented organizations on Wellesley’s campus as well as the Wellesley chapter of the Student Labor Action Project. Within the Shakespeare Society on campus, she brings a passion for pushing diversity within theatre spaces. As she continues her studies, Ms. Owen hopes to expand and concentrate her advocacy efforts. She wants to focus on diversity in academic spaces as well as sexual health. She is excited to continue to pursue what she loves to do.

From the Desk of the Executive Director

February 14, the deadline for entries in Queer Foundation's twelfth annual high school seniors English essay contest (<http://queerfoundation.org/index.html>), is fast approaching. Each year up to three LGBTQA essayists are recognized for their writing and awarded \$1,000 scholarships to help cover their expenses at the U.S. college or university of their choice. We receive in addition many excellent essays for which we are unable to award scholarships; however, many of the authors are happy to grant us permission to post their essays on the Web

(<http://queerfoundation.org/html/specialmention.html>). Many students mention that the very fact that their writing is read means a lot to them.

Every college student who, as a high school senior, participated in the contest is eligible, after their first year in college, to compete for Publication Awards by submitting pieces to The Queer Foundation Scholar, newsletter of The QF. If their piece is accepted for publication, they receive \$500 or \$1,000 scholarships. The newsletter encourages submissions from other college students as well though only former participants in the high school seniors essay contest are eligible to compete for monetary awards.

2017 Queer Foundation has inaugurated a new program in which teachers—at any level, including college/university—can participate. Think of it as a written version of StoryCorps. Though there is no monetary incentive, teachers may submit their own writing to the Teachers' Writing Website

(http://queerfoundation.org/html/teachers_writing/). We hope teachers—especially those in “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” schools—will benefit from reading what other teachers write and be inspired to both submit their own pieces and to encourage LGBTQA students to participate in the programs for students mentioned above.

The success of these programs depends on many volunteers' generous donation of time and money.

Want to know how you can improve a student's chances to succeed? Please consider becoming a contributor to The QF as a donor or volunteer.

Donations to Queer Foundation, ranging from a few dollars to a few thousand, provide scholarships for LGBTQA students in all parts of the United States.

Volunteers mentor students to help them adjust to and do well in college.

Become a part of The QF. Call or write to me, Joseph Dial, QF Executive Director, at (206) 999-8740, jdial@queerfoundation.org, P.O. Box 1206, Ravensdale, WA 98051. Find out what you can do to help.

Queer Foundation is a Washington nonprofit corporation and a 501(c)(3) public charity (EIN: 90-0198562). Find us on GuideStar.org (search for "queer scholars").

From the editor's desk . . .

In Memoriam 2016

Debbie Reynolds who, from her early days in Hollywood, was a beard for a number of gay actors, including Tab Hunter, and who staged the first AIDS benefit (in the Hollywood Bowl) in 1983, four years before President Reagan mentioned AIDS in public. Reynolds was an unwavering and unapologetic supporter of the LGBTQ community all her adult life.

Prince, David Bowie, and George Michael who convinced many people that there wasn't just one way to be a man.

Garbage by any other name still stinks.

The National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (the NARTH Institute), located in Encino, CA, has long been the major proponent of conversion therapy. NARTH, which lost its 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status in September 2012 for its repeated failure to file required IRS forms, has risen from the ashes with a new research arm. They earn a gold star for creative marketing with their new name: Alliance for Therapeutic Choice and Scientific Integrity (ATSCI). ATSCI also has a new name for conversion therapy: Sexual Attraction Fluidity Exploration in Therapy (SAFE-T)!

However, it really doesn't matter how many times they change their name and that of conversion therapy or reparative therapy or pray-the-gay away, they are still peddling a procedure that uses shame and guilt to convince young people that they can cure their same-sex attraction.

We can expect to hear more from this group in the years ahead since Vice President Mike Pence is a strong supporter of conversion

therapy, having suggested on at least one occasion that funds devoted to HIV/AIDS research should instead be used for conversion therapy research.

It all depends on how you define "to recruit."

The American Family Council (AFC), in particular, is stepping up its claim that pro-LGBTQ organizations recruit youth. We respond by arguing that it's just one more lie our enemies tell. However, it all depends on how one defines "to recruit." As part of our recruitment efforts, the AFC cites the "It Gets Better" Project and Anti-bullying legislation. Since homosexuality is, in their opinion, an aberration and a sin against their god, it must be severely punished or, at the very least, subjected to extreme ridicule. Anything that even remotely suggests that we tolerate any "deviation" from their limited view of human sexuality, let alone that we support or approve of such "deviation," therefore, becomes a form of recruitment.

Sadly, we are now going to have to fight a rearguard battle against a religious belief system that is willing to devour its own children even if all they do is dare to question such beliefs. Revolutions or, in this case, counter-revolutions have a tendency to do that. Will a modern-day Goya appear to portray the atrocities we may face in the years ahead?

Yet another deception.

We will be hearing a great deal about the First Amendment Defense Act (FADA) in 2017. The proposed legislation will most likely pass the

U.S. House and unless Senate Republicans keep the filibuster, the Senate. President Trump may sign the bill or, as he's doing so far, he may ignore Congress and simply issue his own executive order accomplishing the same goal without the need for Congress.

The supporters of the bill argue that it will allow people with “sincerely held religious beliefs” and who own businesses that cater to the public to refuse to participate directly or indirectly in same-sex marriages, e.g., wedding chapels, reception halls, caterers, florists, bakers, etc. However, FADA can easily be interpreted to allow anyone to discriminate against married same-sex couples, e.g., home and apartment owners, health providers, insurance companies, loan providers, etc., expanding the provisions of the Hobby Lobby case. Goodbye separation of Church and State.

Unlike LGBTQ pundits, I'm not convinced FADA will just sail through Congress and be signed by the President. As they've done at the state level, I think business and industry will strongly oppose it, not for religious reasons or even because they support us, but because the law would give individual employees the power to decide who they will and who they will not serve, turning the chain of command upside down.

And, yes, in response to a question from someone on the political right, why should fashion designers be free to not “dress” Melania Trump? They shouldn't. Anyone in business to serve the public should serve the public—as long as that public can pay their prices.

Still, FADA is an indication of things to come. Senator Ted Cruz, the main sponsor of the bill, and his supporters start by attacking same-sex marriage, and piece by piece they will attempt to dismantle all of the small gains made in the past 65 years by women, people of color, and the LGBTQ community.

Will it get worse?

I've written about religious breeding wars in these pages; I've also written about the Quiverfull movement. A young woman born and raised in the Quiverfull movement, but who broke with it, makes the movement sound far more powerful than I had previously imagined.

<https://www.autostraddle.com/category/society-and-culture/first-person-essay/>

See Kiernyn Darkwater, “I was trained in the Culture Wars when I was in Home School....”

And then, yes . . . I can still laugh....

**•I am not gay. I am merely an
‘alternative heterosexual’. I
am also not Jewish. I am an
‘alternative gentile’.**

Matt Gwin (via [itsmattgwin](https://www.itsmattgwin.com/))

Writers of fiction sometimes create alternative realities, but they never forget that they are creating fiction, which is to say they know they are lying. In any nation there are adults who confuse fact and fiction, but woe unto the nation in which the ruling elite is incapable of making that distinction or deliberately sets out to destroy the distinction. We remember that, eventually, liars come to believe their own lies.

A few bright spots.

They were called women's marches, although my women friends referred to them as Pink Pussy Hat Parades. LGBTQ individuals participated in the marches on all seven continents, including Antarctica!

<https://www.autostraddle.com/5-million-strong-against-trump-100-pictures-of-queer-power-at-womens-marches-worldwide-366486/>

There were also photos of LGBTQ individuals at protests against Trump's immigration ban.

Now if only the women's movement will give birth to the absolutely worst bad, kick-ass generation of women who will finally establish equality as a reality, not merely a symbol then I will go quietly to my grave.

Odds 'n ends.

- Two queer films shown at Sundance 2017 are getting lots of positive publicity. *Call Me By Your Name* (Italy/US, 2017) is based on the 2007 queer novel by André Aciman, dealing with the love affair between a precocious 17-year-old American Italian and his 25ish Italian tutor.

God's Own Country (UK, 2017) concerns a lonely sheep farmer in remote Yorkshire, England, who hires a Roumanian to help with the shearing, and the passionate affair that soon develops between the two men.

Trailers of both films are available on most film websites.

- One former QF Scholar reported from NYC that he was off to see *Paris 5:59* (France, 2017). See, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/paris-559-theo-hugo-dans-865417> . I'll withhold judgment until I see the film, but I'll wonder if the film's premise might make more sense if the two main characters were both experiencing sex for the first time. I also suspect that this film isn't one you can watch with just anyone!

- *Jane's Wedding* (The Philippines, 2017). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jaLrspvW1-w> The film explores an apparently common phenomenon in parts of Asia: lesbians who marry much older men. Why on earth for?

- *Baisers cachés* (France, 2017; "Hidden Kisses"). Two teen boys meet at a party and end up kissing each other, a fact captured on film. One boy comes to accept his homosexuality; the other is pushed to the edge of insanity and suicide trying to deny it. An independent gem that explores the impact that parental acceptance or rejection can have on both parents and sons. And the film ends on a positive note. The film was on YouTube in January, but then apparently pulled.

- *1992* (France, 2017). A gay high school student seduces one of his teachers, leading to a passionate affair, and motivating yet a different parental reaction.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uk_THXw7uzs

- Daytime and nighttime SOAPs in many countries now routinely feature queers, from Japan's *Takumi* to Catalunya's *El Cors de la Ciutat*, to Norway's web series *Skam*. If you're a young gay male, and you've not yet seen episodes of last year's season of *Skam*, several episodes can be found on YouTube. Isak and Even are about as idyllic a young couple as one can imagine. Oh, to be 14, innocent (naive), and handsome again!

- *Sirenos*, aka *Félix et le poisson* (Cuba/France, 2017). Mermen really do exist, and they can live out of water if given proper attention and love. A young Cuban, living along the sea, discovers a wounded merman and takes him home. Love ensues. I haven't yet figured out if this is somehow a parody of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. There appear to be similarities.

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