

EXPLORING THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF BLACK QUEER EMBODIMENT IN
MOONLIGHT AND TANGERINE

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A Thesis submitted to the faculty of
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In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
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Master of Arts

In

Cinema Studies

by

Mychal Reiff-Shanks

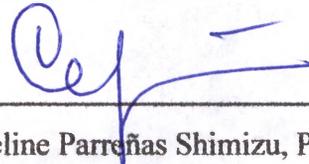
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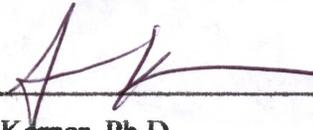
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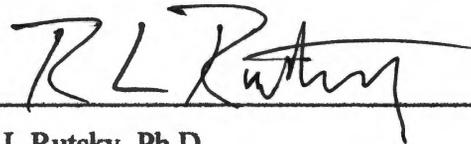
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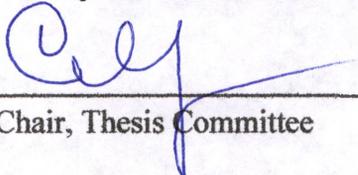
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EXPLORING THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF BLACK QUEER EMBODIMENT IN
MOONLIGHT AND TANGERINE

Mychal Reiff-Shanks
San Francisco, California
2019

In my thesis, I will be discussing how the filmic body through the theoretical understanding of phenomenology is a coded body. By coded I mean racially, sexually, and more. When viewing films, the focus has always been on the spectator's identity to the film. But I will argue that the film itself has an identity that is seen within the film itself through camera angles, coloring, language, and content. First I will be looking at the historical context of phenomenology both in terms of its origin in philosophy and its use in feminist film theory to explain what I mean when I say the film has a body. Then I will use two filmic examples both representing aspects of the Black queer experience, *Tangerine* and *Moonlight*.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Chair, Thesis Committee

May 23, 2019

Date

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In 2016, a handful of friends and I went to our local art-house theater to go see *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016). We were running a little late so after getting my popcorn, I rushed into the theater. The crowd was small due to the fact it was a matinee on a weekday. From what I could remember, the majority of the audience were older White couples. I believe I was the only Black person in the theater. The movie starts and the first thing we see is a black screen with Boris Gardener's hit song "Every Nigga is a Star" and the soft sound of ocean waves. My skin gets a chill as I bob my head to the music and silently sing along. Within the first few seconds of the movie, I'm already feeling a connection to my Blackness before the actors hit the screen. The rest of my experience was mundane from what I can remember. The key things I remember are my White friends crying, being aware of eating my popcorn, and being in complete awe of how much I wanted to both be Trevante Rhodes and be with him, which is the usual dilemma my gender fluidity causes. I remember thinking about how distinctively Black and queer *Moonlight* felt. Even though my experience seeing the movie wasn't distinctively memorable, three years after seeing *Moonlight*, I wasn't able to rewatch it. Though it was available on Amazon Prime and I even bought it on Blu-ray during a Black Friday splurge, affording me every opportunity for a rewatch.

I had a vastly different experience watching *Tangerine*, the 2015 Sundance hit directed and written by Sean Baker. I heard a lot of buzz around *Tangerine*. Mostly it's praised for being shot on an iPhone and the casting of transgender actors. I finally

watched it the night before it was about to leave Netflix, alone in my room on my old laptop. All I remember during that experience was thinking the film was good but overhyped. *Moonlight* and *Tangerine* though vastly different films in tone, both tackle a similar theme: the violence imposed on Black queerness. As I was reflecting on these films, I realized the two films *feel* different even though they are addressing the same issue.

I believe what makes some films distinctively Black and/or queer is the filmic body itself is Black and/or queer. My paper will discuss how the filmic body is a coded body and although the subject matter or the on-screen bodies of two films may be of similar identities, the filmic body is inherently different; additionally when interacting with the film spectator—especially one who shares a similar coding—it creates a personal phenomenological experience, which is inherently understood and shared. The film's body has been vastly ignored. This erasure of the film's identity must stop because it denies the film's body agency, claim to identity, and substantial connection with the body of the spectator which last much longer than when the credits have rolled. I will demonstrate this theory using two films, *Moonlight* and *Tangerine*. I will first discuss the concept of phenomenology and how I choose to define the filmic body in this essay. Then, I will compare and contrast two films to demonstrate how the feeling of identification goes beyond knowing who is in front and/or behind the camera but is ingrained in the film itself through the use of camera composition and movement, coloring, language, and the portrayal of content.

There are numerous aspects that make up a film; I'll explain why I believe these four elements are the initial aspects to use to decipher the coded body of a film from a phenomenological standpoint. These four are jumping off points since the filmic apparatus as a whole is what encapsulates the film's body. Before that, I'll begin by explaining phenomenology and briefly examining some of its foundational scholars. Phenomenology is the study of experience. Specifically, the first-person consciousness of experiencing, "the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience."¹ The field of phenomenology came into prominence during the 20th Century due to the teachings of four philosophers: Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. However, I will only be focusing on Husserl and Sartre because their theories helped me narrow down the filmic elements I will use to codify the film's body. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is known for his three periods of phenomenology: epistemological or pre-transcendental phenomenology, fully transcendental phenomenology, and genetic phenomenology. For the purposes of my essay, I will only be concentrating on epistemological or pre-transcendental phenomenology. Epistemological phenomenology centered on the debate between formalism, to emphasize form over meaning, and psychologism, to interpret events in subjective terms. During this period, Husserl posited, language is "the medium in which meanings are expressed and communicated. This implies that meaning is in some sense

¹ "Phenomenology," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Last modified December 16, 2013, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>.

prior to language...”² Film is a visual medium first and foremost. What separates it from other visual art forms is the movement of the images and later the addition of sound. Semiotics theorizes film has its own visual language through the use of symbols and signs. Film theorist Teresa De Lauretis discusses language in film stating, “if language can be considered an apparatus like cinema, producing meanings through physical means (the body, the articulatory and hearing organs, the brain) cinematic enunciation is more expensive than speech.”³ Film is the embodiment of Husserl’s idea; meaning supersedes language and the film’s language is based in meaning and symbols thus it surpasses verbal language as a form of communication.

Jean-Paul Sartre’s (1905-1980) book *Being and Nothingness* is divided into four parts. I will be addressing Being-for-others, which he discusses how, “I can have no access to the subjectivity of the Other, who appears to me as a simple object of consciousness. [...] In so far as I look at the Other, I affirm myself as an existing consciousness for which the Other is an object.”⁴ Sartre uses the example of shame and how we do not personally experience the Other’s judgment or subjectivity, instead, our own subjectivity is transforming due to the subjectivity of the Other. Sartre is an exciting addition to film theory because he moves us past our own gaze and encourages us to talk about the act of looking and being looked at, which is important in feminist film theory.

² Christopher E Macann, *Four Phenomenological Philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty* (London: New York: Routledge, 1993), 5.

³ Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 32.

⁴ Macann, 142.

The gaze is a vital concept within film theory and with the two films, *Tangerine* and *Moonlight*, the gaze can truly be an entry point for connection. “In allowing myself to be looked at, I experience my own possession by the other.”⁵ Each time we watch a film, we are inviting this to happen, to be gazed upon, to feel our own bodily experience.

I find Husserl and Sartre intriguing when looking at cinema. Film relies heavily on visuals to convey meaning. The creator of these images, besides the filmmaker, is the camera. The camera shows the filmic world. It dictates what is shown and is the mechanical eye of the viewer and filmmaker. Husserl’s concept of meaning preceding language is one of the reasons why I believe the camera composition and movement can tell the audience what the filmic body is before dialogue is said on screen. The camera is silent and captures the image. Through these images, a visual language is created that we are able to comprehend. The camera can detect the unspoken meaning beyond verbal language but language is still the medium we have for communicating meaning to each other, the film body, and the spectator. Besides seeing, the camera is a phantom body. We never see the body of the camera but it is seen in the way it captures the other, similar to Sartre’s idea of subjectivity. Through capturing the other’s subjectivity, it turns the camera from an object to a subject, witnessing the other. This is why I believe the camera composition and movement is an important marker for coding the filmic body. Though when I mean camera, not only am I including the literal technological device, but also the sense of the mechanical eye of both the filmmaker and the spectator.

⁵ Ibid, 148.

Considering I have laid down some of the foundational work of phenomenology, I want to move on to two film theorists who are vastly important to my research, Vivian Sobchack and Jennifer Barker. Vivian Sobchack wrote two instrumental books on the subject of film phenomenology. The first, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, and the second, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. I am going to be discussing mainly her work in *The Address of the Eye*. Before that, I'll briefly mention *Carnal Thoughts*. In this piece, Sobchack emphasizes film is an experience that is felt with in the body and senses stating, “*to understand movies figurally, we first must make literal sense of them*”⁶ (original emphasis). She calls out film theorist for distancing their bodies from the film experience since the two are so deeply connected. “The film experience is meaningful *not to the side of our bodies but because of our bodies*. Which is to say that movies provoke in us the ‘carnal thoughts’ that ground and inform more conscious analysis.”⁷ I agree with Sobchack that critical film theory needs to stop distancing itself from the filmic experience. Distancing oneself from discussion creates a perceived hegemonic experience. Before going any further, I want to make clear the experiences expressed in this paper are my own as a light skin Black, Queer, able-bodied person. Some who read this may relate to my various privileges and oppressions, but these are my unique experiences like with the films themselves.

⁶ Vivian Carol Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 59.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

In *The Address of the Eye*, Sobchack describes her understanding of the film's body. According to Sobchack, film has a literal body. "In this sense, the camera and projector and accompanying mechanisms can be said to substantially embody the film and to function in a way that far exceeds their characterization as merely mechanical instruments and discrete pieces of apparatus. In this sense, the film can be said to genuinely have and live a body."⁸ The filmic apparatus, as a whole, creates the basic functions of bodily sentience from a phenomenological standpoint, she argues. The film can see, hear, touch, etc. and we do the same to it, thus giving the film a physical body. Sobchack's theory of the film's body is radical. When considering how I define the film's body, I both support and oppose her definition. I agree the camera, lighting, sound, editing, and everything that makes a film, performs a physical, worldly function similar to a body. For example, films can grow old, both physically with the film material itself and due to its content, such as offensive jokes. Though I agree there are physical aspects to the film's body, I don't believe it is completely physical in nature. I believe it is also metaphorical, which I will emphasize when discussing Jennifer Barker. Film is a physical body as well because its thoughts and opinions go beyond just its physical functions. Films are ideological machines and ideology is as much a part of the body as breathing and eating. Ideology can physically shape your body and existence. Being fat all my life, I went through physical changes of dieting and exercise because of the societal influence to be skinny. When thinking of the film's body, I lean towards Husserl's theory:

⁸ Vivian Carol Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 205.

As soon as I establish with regard to my body that distance which is the necessary prerequisite for any intentional investigation whatsoever one of two things happens: either my body gets transformed into a physical body (and as such a body which can be analysed along the lines as any other physical body) or my body gets transformed into a psychic body (which, at best, floats ambiguously between the physical and the psychological – the so-called psycho-somatic unity—at worst, get dragged down into the realm of the psychological).⁹

When I talk about the filmic body, I'm referring to the in-between body of both physical and psychic origin. Much like the human body that creates film, arguing it's one or the other takes away the complexity and agency film has.

Sobchack addresses how historically women, people of color, queer people, and other identity minorities are underrepresented in phenomenology. Sobchack mentions theorist Iris Young and her piece, *Throwing Like A Girl*, where she addresses societies' patriarchal views of women creates a phenomenological experience for female-identified people through the way they experience spatiality, motility, and body comportment. Sobchack mainly focuses on the phenomenology of the spectator. As she ends the chapter, she states:

The film's 'body' is not sexed, although it is sensible and sensual. It is not 'colored,' although today its vision usually takes up the world as such. It is not 'impaired,' 'fat,' 'old,' or 'deprived' [...] Obviously, films are only films insofar as they are made through human artifice and intention and engaged by human spectators. Obviously, their significance as the kind of phenomena we are. Nonetheless, insofar as the film's material conditions for providing access to the world, accomplishing the commutation of perception and expression and constituting or signifying a significant coherence are different from our own, they provide us actual and possible modes of becoming other than we are. Thus, even as human bodies engage the film's body in an always correlated activity (whether

⁹ Macann, *Four Phenomenological Philosophers*, 43-44.

filmmaking or spectating), the film's material body also always engages us in its possibilities as a nonhuman lived-body.¹⁰

Obviously, I disagree and believe the film's body is sexed, colored, old, and/or more. I think like Sartre mentioned earlier that one body's subjectivity is affected by the other. The material of film itself is not neutral. Film becomes a body when human involvement is done to the material. Later in this same chapter, Sobchack equates film to a cyborg and suggests some cyborgs try to give the appearance of neutrality, yet they are still anthropomorphized and cannot be distanced from the human involvement process. Even though it is people who anthropomorphize robots and the robots themselves are neutral, it is our subjectivity that gives them subjectivity and vice versa. Earlier in her chapter, she states, "Such phenomenological description might, for example, take another kind of look at those films that (perhaps quite aptly) have been called 'women's pictures' [...]. As has been suggested, what might be described are the correlated postural schemas, motility, and spatiality of both the spectators watching the film and the film itself as spectator"¹¹ I agree that categorization of films like melodramas, Blaxploitation, and so on have partially been named this due to specific spectatorship, but that's only half of the reason. When looking at Blaxploitation as an example, White and Black spectators would be in attendance. The genre of Blaxploitation goes beyond who is watching it and, as I've been arguing, is ingrained in the filmic body itself.

¹⁰ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 162-163.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

Jennifer Barker's book, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic*, discusses the tactile experience of watching cinema. "I hope to show that touch is a 'style of being' shared by both film and viewer, and that particular structures of human touch correspond to particular structures of the cinematic experience. In other words, the forms of tactility that filmgoers experience at the movies are shared—in complex, not always comfortable ways—by both spectator and film."¹² She divides the book into three sections or parts of the body, the skin, the musculature, and the viscera.

Barker's first dissection of the filmic body is the skin, which she doesn't mean in the literal sense of human flesh but "as Merleau-Ponty said of touch, 'skin' also denotes a general style of being in the world, and if skin is not merely a biological or material entity but also a mode of perception and expression that forms the surface of a body, then film can indeed be said to have a skin."¹³ She discusses the concept of the film's skin through the feelings and genres of eroticism, pleasure, and horror. Her main point is the filmic body and our, the spectator's, body are two different bodies. She states:

In the moment that my skin and the film's skin and the film's skin press against or envelope one another, the film becomes accessible and transparent to me. At the same moment, though, it is also partially inaccessible and opaque, because I may touch the film's surface, but I cannot touch either the entire process of its making or the pro-filmic world of which it is a trace. This is because, as Merleau-Ponty wrote, 'I am always on the same side of my body.' While there is contact and intertwining, there is never a collapse or dissolution of the boundary between us. Thus, this touch is a teasing one.¹⁴

¹² Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

Although the idea of the film's body and our body interacting can be almost sensual and blurred at times, we are still ourselves and the film is itself. Sometimes, it is difficult to remember if the filmic body is similarly coded to our own. The concept of skin is a reason why I believe color in film is important to codify the film's body. The visual colors of a film, whether done during filming or in post production, create a tonal language similar to the camera. Skin, especially in humans, is also colored and that color is perceived and examined by others. If the camera is the movement of a phantom body, then the coloring of the film I would consider part of the skin.

The second chapter is about the musculature of the body. "I will argue here that viewer and film are two differently constructed but equally muscular bodies, acting perhaps in tandem or perhaps at odds with each other, but always in relation to each other."¹⁵ She heavily uses the filmic example of Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), where Keaton is a movie theater worker who physically enters the film he is showing and becomes part of its world. Barker theorizes the reason our body and the filmic body work together is due to empathy.

The empathy between the film's and viewer's bodies goes so deeply that we can feel the film's body, live vicariously through it, and experience its movements to such an extent that we ourselves become momentarily as graceful or powerful as the film's body, and we leave the theater feeling invigorated or exhausted, though we ourselves have hardly moved a muscle.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., 72.

¹⁶ Ibid., 83.

This concept reinforces my inclusion of camera composition and movement. The camera does not move the way people do because of the use of stabilizing devices, yet due to our empathy towards its body, we mimic its movement versus it to us, as you will see emphasized in the filmic examples.

The third and final chapter is about the viscera.

When we speak of viscera, we're usually speaking about one of two things. Either we use the term in its specific, medical sense to refer to the internal organs, including, for example, the heart, lungs, and pancreas, or we use the term more vaguely, to refer to a general area—the insides, the depths, the guts—that describes not organs but feelings, emotions, and intuition.¹⁷

Barker briefly mentions the medical phenomenology of viscera, but she mainly focuses on the emotional viscera. Harking back to early cinema, she discusses how early film was inspired by physical amusement attractions, such as the rollercoaster, and most of these films were images, like a train, in motion. Through this motion of the skin and musculature, the film goes through our bodies into the viscera making our heart beat faster, induce nausea and etc. Though she is talking about physical effective moments in film that trigger emotions, I want to argue language and content should be included for causing a visceral response. As the old children's rhyme goes: "sticks and stones may break my bones but words may never hurt me" is obviously untrue in modern society. Words, in this technological era, can have an extreme emotional and physical impact on people to the extent of causing trauma. The language and content in film can have similar regards. What might be harmless to one individual could be triggering to another, causing

¹⁷ Ibid., 122.

internal distress, such as panic attacks, nausea, and more. Also, language and content can be coded, which I will discuss in depth in the filmic examples.

Now, I will be looking at the filmic example of *Tangerine*. Sean Baker, a White cisgender straight male filmmaker, directed, wrote and edited the film. In an interview with *Queerty*, he talks about the story process and how he and his writing partner, Chris Bergoch, another White cisgender man, were researching for a film around Santa Monica and Highland. Baker explains, “We weren’t finding that one person who could be a collaborator. We learned from *Prince of Broadway*, which is a film I made before *Starlet*, that being from outside that world you need to find that one person to be your passport. In this case, we found Mya at the LGBT Center.”¹⁸ The process was relatively collaborative. Kitana Kiki Rodriguez actually came up with the plot of having the boyfriend/pimp cheat on her character, Sin-Dee. As the interview continues, it becomes apparent Baker did his due diligence with crafting a story about people other than himself. When he was asked how he gained the women’s trust, he responded with:

At the time I was still very conscientious that this is a sensitive issue and I’m a cisgender white male so there might be some apprehension or resistance to someone like me trying to tell a story like this. I told Mya that I would only do it with her and Kiki’s approval every step of the way. I wanted them to be happy with this film and with the representation of this subculture. By that I mean, trans women of color who are sex workers.¹⁹

¹⁸ Jeremy Kinser, “Tangerine Director Sean Baker May Be A Straight White Man, But He’s Made A Terrific Movie About Transgender Women Of Color,” *Queerty*, July 9, 2015, <https://www.queerty.com/tangerine-director-sean-baker-may-be-a-straight-white-man-but-hes-made-a-terrific-movie-about-transgender-women-of-color-20150709>.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

With this information of collaboration, does the film feel like it's coming from an outsider's perspective? I would argue yes.

Most of the hype surrounding *Tangerine* when it was first released was due to its unconventional guerilla-style filmmaking. The entire film was shot on an Apple iPhone. The use of the iPhone creates a type of intimacy compared to conventional filmmaking. Cell phones have become commonplace as the technological device we use on a daily basis. It holds our schedules, entertainment, social life, and memories, such as texts, voicemails, and photographs. Our use of cell phones create an intimacy the size reinforces. Considering filmmaking cameras have incredibly decreased in size with DSLR cameras, the equipment and filmic apparatus is still cumbersome compared to the lightweight nature of the cell phone. All of this outer context intimacy is continuously disrupted in the film itself. The film constantly uses angles and framing techniques that create an awkward image, which in effect creates an emotional distancing of viewer and on screen subject. Queer theorist, Sara Ahmed, theorizes that phenomenology can be queer by offering a different perspective on the idea of orientation.²⁰ "Orientations, then, are about the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places."²¹ Ahmed's concept of queering is an interesting way of possibly reading the following scene, but I believe the disorientation comes from a place of authoritative distancing with the audience in the position of power instead of it being imposed on both the characters and us. This can be

²⁰ Sara Ahmed, "Introduction: Find Your Way," in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

seen throughout the film but I will highlight three examples where the intimate nature of the scene is contradicted by the camera composition and movement with two distinctive shots: tracking and close-up.

The first scene I'm addressing happens in the first few minutes of the movie. Sin-Dee and Alexandra meet up to catch up after Sin-Dee has been in prison for a month. The two share a donut and chat. It is revealed Chester, Sin-Dee's and Alexandra's pimp, as well as Sin-Dee's supposed boyfriend, is cheating on her with "some White fish"²² aka a cisgender White woman. Quickly after finding out this revelation, Sin-Dee leaves the donut shop, Donut Time, which becomes a recurring location in the film. As she leaves, rhythmic dance music plays with repetitive vocal and gun shoots. As the music plays, we track Sin-Dee walking down the Los Angeles street. The camera starts a few feet away from her as it rapidly zooms in towards her and then passes her. This technique happens five times in the scene. As we follow Sin-Dee on her mission, the music and the camera mimic each other with the camera editing changing with the beat. But are we truly following her or is she dragging us along? This rapid tracking and zoom happen a couple of times in the film, mainly with Sin-Dee, as she relentlessly tracks down Chester and the mystery woman he is sleeping with, whom we later find out is Dinah. Less than five minutes into the film, we are literally swept into Sin-Dee's world but aren't able to get proper footing. This tracking shot disorients us, as the shots themselves don't come from one direction. The first comes from her left side zooming across to the right. The second

²² Sean Baker, *Tangerine*, Directed by Sean Baker, Performed by Kitana Kiki Rodriguez and Mya Taylor, (2015; New York: Magnolia Pictures, 2015), Hulu.

is in the front, coming towards her and her coming towards us like a possible collision. The third is from behind as we try to catch up with her. Then, for a moment, we are even beside her as we walk alongside her. Suddenly, we are back to being behind again. The rapid nature of the camera only gives us glimpses of Sin-Dee and the unnatural movement of the camera makes it difficult for our bodies to empathize with the movements of the film's body. Because I am unable to empathize with the film on a bodily level, the camera creates an emotional distance between the film and viewer.

The second scene I will be examining is the musical number. During this scene, Alexandra sings in the bar, which creates a thematic distancing, since it is the only musical number in the film. The scene doesn't feel entirely out of place but it does feel unusual compared to the rest of the movie. The scene begins with a medium wide shot of Alexandra sitting on a stool with a red dress in front of a red curtain singing Victor Herbert's rendition of "Toyland." The scene is only two minutes and it consists of roughly twenty-four cuts. The song itself is slow, however the pacing of the shots is relatively fast and quick. The bulk of the shots are Alexandra singing, ranging from medium to close-up shots coming from all directions. Then, there are quick cuts to Sin-Dee and Dinah as they watch Alexandra perform. Sin-Dee has a dreamy expression as she supports her best friend combined with the fact that she and Dinah smoked crack before the performance. The slow-paced and more emotionally intimate nature of the scene leaves us, the spectator, some time to take in the characters especially with the amount of close shots of Alexandra's and Sin-Dee's motionless bodies, which so far in

the film have been constantly moving. The editing is still consistent with the pace of the rest of the film but this moment of pause gives us a glimpse into the vulnerability of these women's lives. In the previously stated Queerty interview with Sean Baker, he mentions, "I realized these women are dealing with such hardships that they use humor to deal with it."²³ Humor is evident throughout the film, however during the musical number and the scene I will be discussing next, it is temporarily subdued so the characters share a moment of vulnerability with each other and us, the audience.

In the final scene of the film, after having piss thrown on her by a group of bigoted men in a car, Alexandra takes Sin-Dee to a nearby laundromat to clean her up. At the laundromat, Sin-Dee proceeds to remove her clothes. When Alexandra suggests she remove her wig, Sin-Dee is hesitant but finally agrees. The two sit on a bench in front of the store window in a wide medium shot as they wait for her clothes to wash. Sin-Dee, completely exposed, fidgets in her seat. Alexandra notices Sin-Dee's discomfort and takes her wig off, then hands it to her friend. Alexandra helps her put it on and the two joke about being bald and Alexandra's hair looking good on Sin-Dee. The final shot of the film is Sin-Dee and Alexandra holding hands while Sin-Dee looks away from both Alexandra and the camera. Her face is covered by the wig as Alexandra gazes upon her. The camera is stagnant in these final moments, which is rare for the hour and twenty minutes of adrenaline and fast editing we have been watching. Finally, the camera isn't

²³ Jeremy Kinser, "Tangerine Director Sean Baker May Be A Straight White Man, But He's Made A Terrific Movie About Transgender Women Of Color."

trying to distance us from connecting with the characters. We are able to sit with them and be in their space.

Besides the camera, coloring is another component of the filmic body. The opening scene of *Tangerine* fades into a scratched yellow table, which establishes the majority of the coloring of the film. The film is mostly colored in a yellowish glow reminiscent of the Los Angeles location the film is shot in. The color of the film sets up the mood of the film. I associate the color yellow with bright, positivity, and in the natural world, sunshine. The yellow tint adds to the comedic nature of *Tangerine* and highlights the sunny Southern California location. The yellow also highlights the filth seen around the city streets by Sin-Dee and Alexandra as they roam around. The filth is brought out from the shadows into the light. The yellow coloring both accentuates the natural outdoor lighting of the sun and the fluorescent indoor lighting of the donut shop and other establishments they frequent. In addition, the exterior of the buildings are usually painted yellow. The yellow tone helps create a sense of place, yet this particular coloring of the film drowns out the skin tone of the main characters in most of the outdoor scenes; in doing so it positions Sin-Dee and Alexandra as similar skin complexions, which they are not. The light is also very harsh on the eyes, which can be physically draining on the eyes. Making it physically unpleasant to watch visually.

Speech and language is an important component of the filmic body. In *Tangerine*, slurs are used for comedic effect. Sin-Dee and Alexandra use cutting, biting and witty words and phrases to put each other down. The act of “reading,” a queer term pertaining

to the act of calling out someone's flaws and insecurities in a jovial nature, as defined in the film, *Paris is Burning*. "Reading" is not performed with malicious intent but as a way of showing comfortability and vulnerability with close peers and friends. This is also seen with the casualness of using words like bitch, whore, and other gendered expletives. The first line of dialogue in the movie is Sin-Dee saying, "Merry Christmas Eve, bitch!"²⁴ The use of derogatory language reinforces the film's humorous tone while subverting the cultural norm. It is apparent the characters are reclaiming derogatory terms that are commonly used on individuals and groups like them. This is made clear when Sin-Dee and Alexandra are talking to each other; however, when Sin-Dee talks about Dinah, the woman Chester is cheating on her with, the tone shifts and mimics the patriarchal power structures. The power Sin-Dee has over these words compared to Chester, a cisgender White pimp, is definitely lacking, yet these certain terms are still used as methods of demeaning Dinah and demonstrate an act of verbal violence, which is further supported by Sin-Dee physically dragging Dinah around Los Angeles. Dinah is not threatened by Sin-Dee's use of these words because she is aware of the lack of verbal power Sin-Dee possesses as a Trans Woman of Color. Because of this awareness, Dinah gives it as well as she can take it by saying transphobic comments to Sin-Dee. Both women, belonging to different oppressed groups, are perpetuating oppressive, specifically patriarchal, behavior. This issue I will further discuss in the following paragraph. The reclamation of derogatory words is up to individuals within that specific community, yet in *Tangerine*

²⁴ Sean Baker, *Tangerine*.

the line is significantly blurred in respect to whether or not subversion is happening within the language or if it is reinforcing hurtful dialogue. Maybe the film is doing both?

The final aspect of the filmic body I'm addressing is less technical and more about the literal phenomenologically affect depiction of violence on screen has on our bodies as spectators. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, language is used as a tool to perpetuate violence but physical violence is equally imposed, which is directed toward the women in the film. Sin-Dee blames Dinah for Chester's adultery and thus the plot of the movie is spent hunting her, and eventually Chester, down. The whole second act consists of Sin-Dee dragging around a barefoot, half-dressed Dinah by her hair and arms all around Los Angeles, while Dinah screams for help to no avail. The sight of a Brown trans woman being rough with a White woman elicits an affective response in me, as a Black queer viewer. Mainly because of the historical implication of Black and Brown people, mainly men, being accused of harming or assaulting White women. This is amplified since Trans Women have been misrepresented or seen in society as men, which is unequivocally false. Plus, I am also aware of the harm perpetrated on sex workers. All of these fears and worries come from a historical and personal outer cinematic perspective. The film never truly addresses the power dynamic of the women in a way that leaves me satisfied, nor does it have to. As a person, who experiences a portion of this daily, the film feels emotionally abusive. It glosses over the violence with humor but still depicts the violence.

Violence is performed on both women as seen when Alexandra interacts with her first john, on screen. A White man propositions her but is unable to pay the full amount for her services. After haggling the price, they agree on her holding his testicles while he pleasures himself. After a few minutes of impatience on both ends, it concludes with the john not giving Alexandra her money, which leads to a brawl outside of the car. During the scuffle, Alexandra says, “You forget I got a dick, too.”²⁵ This statement, used to garner laughs, provides a glimpse into the power dynamics in play on the streets. The scene hints at Alexandra having the power as she dictates what she will do, bosses the john around, and makes fun of his manhood. But as we witness, the power she exerts is minimal compared to the White john and his money she relies on. Once she grabs his keys, it seems the power has shifted back in her favor only to drop the keys and the john grabbing them back. Her line about having a penis is a flimsy exertion of power to paint the two as equals. As the two run around fighting, two nearby police officers see the dispute and decide to interject. One of the police officers before stepping in informs her partner about “Alexander” and misgenders her. Although the cops do not inflict physical violence, they showcase that the power of the transphobic misogynistic institution trumps the power Alexandra may believe she has that in society. In the end, Alexandra is lacking institutional power, which is demonstrated by the fact that she leaves with no money and the john leaves with no repercussions.

²⁵ Sean Baker, *Tangerine*.

The final scene, which I have previously mentioned in the section on the use of the camera, begins with a hate crime. A car full of men, we never actually see onscreen, throws a cup of pee on Sin-Dee. The film is filled with moments of verbal and physical violence, nonetheless the violence is usually played for comedic effect and the perpetrators, until now, are visible in the fact that the audience knows their faces and, in some, cases names. This crime was committed by nameless and bodiless individuals as the last moment of physical on-screen violence. This leads to an emotionally violent scene of Sin-Dee being stripped of her clothes, wig, and by extension her identity. The violence in the film is something that I can both identify with and be distanced from. As a Black queer non-binary person, I experience microaggression as Sin-Dee and Alexandra but the specific violence done to sex workers is something I haven't experienced, which really encompasses *Tangerine's* duality. The film is intimate and for those who are involved in sex work or have these experiences can feel the collaboration Sean Baker claims he did with Mya Taylor and Kitana Kiki Rodriguez, but like the comedy it utilizes, among other things I have stated above, create a personal distancing because I have not truly experienced the life of a Trans Woman of Color sex worker. Political ecstasy, a term coined by Kaja Silverman, is when the viewer desires or idealizes identification with the bodies on screen. The viewer becomes empathetic and if those bodies are different from the viewer they come to understand the differences of the other. "To clarify her concept of political ecstasy, though a rapturous feeling of transcendence, it does not negate the very real confines of identity and body. It's not a matter of

becoming the other, or uniting with the other's body but of learning from proximity so as to invest in the other's future and well-being."²⁶ I believe as a spectator, this happens to me when watching *Tangerine*. I deeply care for Sin-Dee and Alexandra but my empathy for the characters is different from my empathy for the film's body, which I do not experience watching the film. Even though the cast and crew are a collaborative multiracial, sexual and gender variant team, *Tangerine's* filmic body through the camera, coloring, language, and portrayals of violence demonstrates the opposite. The film is consistently distancing the viewer from being able to fully empathize and experience the film's body.

Now we transition to *Moonlight*, which was directed and written by Barry Jenkins. Based on the semi-autobiographical script by Tarell Alvin McCraney, who also co-wrote the screenplay. The film follows the life of Chiron, a gay Black man who lives in a poor neighborhood in Florida with his drug-addicted single mother. The film is split between three vignettes or chapters of Chiron's life: age 10, 16, and early 30s. Each one with a different name or nickname: Little, Chiron, and Black respectively. In an interview with Tarell Alvin McCraney by Dan Allen for *NBC Out*, Allen in the introduction states that *Moonlight* gives, "an unprecedented glimpse into what it means to be young and poor and black and gay in America, the film is also powerfully universal as the story of

²⁶ Celine Parrenas Shimizu, "Unbinding Straitjacket Sexuality: The Calm Manhoods of Asian American Male Hollywood Stars," in *Straitjacket Sexualities: Unbinding Asian American Manhoods in the Movies*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012), 202.

one man's quest for identity.”²⁷ McCraney mentions that Jenkins, who is straight, felt like the story somewhat mirrored his own life growing up in Liberty City, Florida where McCraney and the fictional Chiron also grew up. Allen later in the interview asks the question, “I've seen a lot of gay movies in my day, and honestly, *Moonlight* is one of the most powerful gay-themed stories I've ever seen put to film. But of course, it's also an incredibly powerful black-themed story, too. Do you think it does the story a disservice to focus solely on one or the other?” McCraney's responds, “I think whatever way you have into it is valid and right. [...] It is a queer story, it is a gay story, it is a poverty story — you know what I mean? It is a story about drug addiction. Those things existed, and if we try to take them out or just make it about one of those things, I think it's more disingenuous to do that than anything.”²⁸ This question and answer hints at what I've been discussing. Is it just the theme of a movie that creates identification or does the film's body influence us? The film has a wide appeal, contrary of the topics the film tackles being so specific. *Moonlight* became the first all-Black LGBT film to win an Oscar for Best Picture. Even watching the film myself, my body felt more comfortable with the filmic body of *Moonlight* compared to *Tangerine*. I will now examine *Moonlight* in the same fashion as I did with *Tangerine* previously by looking at the camera work, coloring, language, and portrayals of violence implemented.

²⁷ Dan Allen, “Tarell Alvin McCraney: The Man Who Lived ‘Moonlight’,” NBC News Out, October 20, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/tarell-alvin-mccraney-man-who-lived-moonlight-n670296>.

²⁸ Ibid.

Moonlight is a visually stunning film. Especially the use of tracking shots and close-ups. Tracking shots are used numerous times in *Moonlight*. The opening scene is a tracking shot of Juan conversing with one of his dealers, but I want to specifically focus on the three distinctive times they are used to introduce Chiron in his three phases, each one handheld. The first happens minutes into the film when Little has sprinted past Juan because he is being chased by bullies. As Little runs away, the camera runs behind him and is shaky like that of a body running itself. The second time is after the title card "II. Chiron." We follow Chiron as he walks home from school with his head hanging as he passes through some drying laundry, already a different feeling from the frantic nature of the first one. The third and final shot is in the third chapter when an adult Chiron strolls up to the restaurant where Kevin works. These three shots embody not only the scene but the mood of each chapter itself. Because these three tracking shots mimic the movement of Chiron's body, all from behind, it feels as if our spectatorial body moves with him. With each shot, you can feel the growth of Chiron in his movements and we in return are growing with him with each passing shot. This creates a bodily connection to the character that is not felt in *Tangerine*.

The direct medium close-ups in *Moonlight*, where it is the face of one of the characters staring back at the camera are strikingly memorable to me. The first instance of this happening in the film is much later than memory serves. Chiron is kicked out of his home the night before so his mom can have company over. He strolls back the next morning to be greeted by his mother in the complex courtyard. She asks him where he's

been and it becomes suspiciously clear that something isn't right with her as she fidgets, darts her eyes, and seems somewhat manic. The conversation then transitions into a close handheld tracking of Paula frantically walking to the door with Chiron following behind. These close-ups are relatively rare in the almost two-hour movie, happening only one more time, during the diner dinner scene between Chiron and Kevin, but the intimacy within them is burned onto my body. I think these scenes affect me so much partially because it is the first time you see the physical and emotional toll of the characters and you are unable to look away. Also, these moments are slowed down and partially silent, feeling like a pause as you stare at the character and the character stares back; making you painfully aware of the moment you are sharing. The gaze is almost piercing as the character stares at us. It's a moment of self-reflection I had as a viewer, becoming aware of my own body and gaze as I'm gazed back at. But it is not a moment of disorientation or hostility or even male but of mutual desperation. Desperate to not only be seen but more importantly desperate to be touched. In these moments I felt my body yearn, almost pulled towards the film as my chest ached and I leaned forward in my seat. During the scene with Chiron and Kevin during my second viewing of the film in my home, I reached out my arm to touch my screen. This did not happen originally in the theater. Possibly due to the lack of privacy or the distraction of the theater (eating popcorn, people talking) compared to sitting alone in a room with headphones. The film's desire became my own through the camera.

The coloring for *Moonlight* is on the opposite end of the spectrum compared to *Tangerine*'s, with the film being mostly blue in tone. The blue hue is symbolic for multiple motifs within the film, the first being Juan's speech to Little on the beach about how an old woman from his home country gives him the nickname Blue because "Black boys look blue in the moonlight,"²⁹ which is symbolically demonstrated by Little in the final scene of the movie. Blue is also considered a somber, calming color. *Moonlight* is a drama and the blue hues capture that thematic tone instinctively in a spectator before dialogue is even spoken. The blue also feels symbolically linked to the water, which is both a location and a motif used at each stage of Chiron's life with him having emotionally intimate moments with male figures in his life at or near the beach: such as the swim lesson with Juan, his first sexual experience with Kevin, and his reunion with Kevin. The color, obviously a call back to McCarney's original title "In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue," is reflected in multiple objects as well, like Juan's car, the interior of Chiron's house, and various characters' clothing.

The colors white and black are equally important. The sky often times in the film is a washed out white color. In stark contrast to *Tangerine*'s sun-kissed yellow hue, the sun is a blinding white. The sand on the beaches is also a pale beige/white color and the beach, like the blue, is an important motif in the film. I would feel remiss if I didn't talk about the color black in the film both in the actual color and the skin tone of the entire cast. The film makes it a point to highlight the dark skin of its actors. The identity of

²⁹Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight*, Directed by Barry Jenkins, Performed by Trevante Rhodes, André Holland, and Mahershala Ali, (2016; New York: A24, 2016), Amazon Prime.

blackness even eventually becomes Chiron's identity as he calls himself Black in the final chapter. Blackness is also seen in nature with multiple pivotal scenes happening at night.

Both movies deal with queer culture and language, however *Moonlight* takes a huge shift away from *Tangerine* and demonstrates how these derogatory words are used for hate. Anytime gayness is mentioned by name within *Moonlight*, with the exception of one scene that I will soon discuss, it is used as a form of violence. Chiron is called a "fag" on multiple occasions. The first scene we meet Little, he is being chased by kids who are yelling homophobic slurs and threatening him. This is continued into the second phase with Chiron, who is consistently bullied by one boy in school who uses homophobic slurs as well. The only time in the film which slurs are not used for violence is the final scene in the first vignette where Little is over at Juan's house. He asks Juan, "what's a faggot?" Juan carefully responds, "A faggot is a word used to make gay people feel bad."³⁰ He continues to tell Little how it's okay if he is gay but he doesn't need to figure it out now. This is the first acknowledgment of being gay as acceptable within the movie. *Moonlight* is a movie less about spoken words and more about the unspoken. Throughout each chapter, Chiron never openly states he is gay. The closest we get to a coming out is in the end when Black admits to Kevin, "you the only man that's ever touched me."³¹ This lack of confirmation adds to the longing that is felt throughout the

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

film and the melodramatic effect. Even the ending is ambiguous, never giving me what I fully desire.

This ambiguity is also seen in the violence in *Moonlight*, which seems almost subdued compared to *Tangerine*. Especially when looking at the physical violence. The two instances of physical violence in the film are during chapter two when Kevin is forced to play a punching game with Chiron and when Chiron beats his high school bully, Terrell, with a chair. Both scenes are visceral as the first is done almost exclusively in close-ups of Chiron and Kevin, as they must face each other and the violence both experience due to racial masculine pressure. The scene is directly after Chiron's first sexual interaction with Kevin, or any man, as the two kiss and Kevin performs a handjob. This is the first and only explicit homosexual act in the film. All of this happening only the night before the fight, making the scene even more charged. Though *Moonlight* is visually light on violence, the film is extremely difficult to watch as a Black queer spectator. As I stated in the opening of this thesis, when starting this paper this was only the second time watching *Moonlight* since seeing it in theaters the first time. I am not the only Black queer person I know that has admitted to finding it difficult to rewatch the film. My thesis began as me trying to explain why the film was so difficult to come back to. Now having watched it multiple times, I'm still slightly unsure about my hesitance. I believe it's because the film's body so closely resembles my own and to see a similar body ache with pain that I too have experienced is maybe a reason for my reluctance.

Throughout this paper, I have described and examined something I have always felt in my body as a film spectator, that films have specific bodies that are similar to my own. Films are such a unique experience and “...surely cinema must be our way of ‘looking into the soul.’”³² Looking at phenomenology, I am able to put words to my experience. The film’s body is both physical in the camera, material, and technology but also figurative in its thoughts, ideas, and emotions. Like most critical film theory before it, phenomenology has ignored the individual experiences and bodies of minority spectators but also the film’s own body. The filmic body is a coded body whether it is racially, sexually, gendered, or other. Through the two filmic examples of *Tangerine* and *Moonlight*, I have begun to demonstrate by looking at the filmic body, specifically with camera movement and composition, coloring, language, and content for starters, the identity of the film becomes visible and felt within the spectator. When looking at films like Jordan Peele’s recent movie *Us* (2019) or Dee Rees’ 2011 film, *Pariah*, or any movie which has the label of an identity such as chick flicks or Black or queer, it becomes more obvious what makes these films women’s or Black or queer or a combination of many isn’t just who is seeing it, but an intrinsic identification ingrained in the film, much like the identities of the viewers themselves. By taking into consideration the film’s body, it adds another reason for the ongoing push for diversity. Seeing yourself onscreen isn’t enough, especially if the only place you are represented is on screen. Diversity is a body and soul endeavor that relies on the empathy of others. By acknowledging the agency and

³² Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 37.

identity of the film's body we can move further with seeing more exciting, enriching, and inclusive stories from an array of beautiful, diverse bodies, human and filmic.

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