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Auditory Spaces and Sonic Narratives of Gender: The Queer Phenomenology of Sound in *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine*

Mira Vuorinen

Graduate Center, City University of New York

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AUDITORY SPACES AND SONIC NARRATIVES OF GENDER: THE QUEER
PHENOMENOLOGY OF SOUND IN *GIRLS LOST* AND *TANGERINE*

by

MIRA VUORINEN

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Mira Vuorinen

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Date

Christopher Schmidt

Thesis Advisor

Date

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis

Executive Officer

ABSTRACT

Auditory Spaces and Sonic Narratives of Gender: The Queer Phenomenology of Sound in *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine*

by

Mira Vuorinen

Advisor: Christopher Schmidt

This thesis explores the phenomenological aspects of sound in the Swedish film *Girls Lost* (2015) and the American film *Tangerine* (2015), which are both stories of transgender identities. The thesis considers sound through its affective characteristics and materiality in the films; that sound has an agency in a story-telling and that sounds actively create the world and spaces the characters and the listener-viewer inhabit. By utilizing Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology as a theoretical lens and bringing it together with phenomenology of sound, the thesis focuses on what is in the background and usually left behind in film analysis of gender identities. This thesis approaches sounds not only as extensions of the characters' bodies in *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* but pays attention to how certain sounds narrate the world as part of the characters' gender identities.

Through the film analysis of *Girls Lost*, the thesis discusses how sounds create an isolation and disconnection and remove the characters from their environment to portray different forms of exclusion and lack of agency. The sounds build moments of intimacy and friendship that allow the characters to retreat to their own world for safety. At the same time, the sounds in *Girls Lost* draw from biological and medical notions of gender, representing transgender identity through the discourse of the "wrong body," wherein the body is a "trap" for transgender individuals. *Tangerine*

depicts very different transgender realities, which the thesis examines through Ahmed's theorization of the Orient and how *Tangerine* resists such definition through its characters and their sonic world. The thesis utilizes the concepts of "sonic color line" and noise to analyze race in relation to the transgender identities and how sounds function as a form of resistance and rejection of the white ideals and norms of both gender and race.

This thesis concludes that *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* show how film sounds form an auditory space of gender; that gender is attached to space and place; and that characters as gendered beings can become detached from their environments through sounds. The sounds in both films are sonic narratives of gender: they align the characters with what is available or within reach for them and their stories, and suggest that gender identities are built through and together with the sonic elements. The materiality, spatiality but also fluid nature of sounds offer queer (and) phenomenological possibilities to articulate affective stories of how gendered bodies meet the world. Sounds enclose meaningfulness and can authentically tell about locations of gender identities and queer moments in and through the medium of film.

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CHAPTER I

Bringing Forth the Sounds of Gender: Introduction

Just as the writer is constituted by the action of the writing that s/he does, the listener is shaped by the act itself, and both are in a moment of self-formation. They intentionally place the self into the space of not-yet-being, of vibrating contemporaneously but imperfectly with the other's resonances and echoes just as engaging in the act of writing induces similar oscillations (I hear the sound of the keys and the whirring of the fan, and I produce my philosophical self). (Justin Patch, 2013)

I remember the sound of the soapy brush in my mother's hand from my childhood summers and how it glided on a home-woven rug. I remember its monotonous, yet sonic, motion and the sound of the water hose when the soap was finally rinsed off. The sound of flowing water orchestrated the washing ritual and what now happens to be a disappearing tradition in Finland mostly practiced by women: washing rugs during the summer in the designated "piers" often situated close to the beach. I find myself missing this sound because I associate it with so many good things: being on a summer vacation, being outdoors, being able to play with the water, having my older sister there with me, and with special kind of closeness with my mother who was gaining her independence and happiness after a divorce.

I remember Christmas Day dinners at my grandparents' place from my childhood. The house was full of tensions caused by family histories, but the space was also divided by gender: men sit in their own room, women in their own space. The women always did the dishes. The sound of water and clattering of plates and cutlery momentarily shaped the kitchen as a space where the men would not enter. During that moment, the kitchen became a space for the women to silently talk through the tension and their worries as the sound of doing dishes both hid their speech and provided a privacy that none of the men would interrupt.

I remember how I moved into a new neighborhood in Brooklyn in summer 2016 and the

sounds of streets that I explored with excitement; the laughter of the children and lively chattering flowing freely together with the bouncing basketballs in the courtyards of nearby housings. But I also remember the catcalling on Gates Avenue where I went for my evening runs. I remember men first whistling and then shouting at me, trying to stop me and eventually, after a few evening runs, one following me with a bike. After two weeks I already knew how that street would sound, how it would feel and how I had embodied those sounds as something to avoid – something to be afraid of.

And I remember Christmas Eve 2015 here in NYC when I went to MoMA PS1 to experience Jonah Groeneboer's acoustic art installation. The artist had asked trans*¹ and gender queer participants to express their gender identity vocally, through sounds but not words. Speakers playing the sounds were organized in a circle and every speaker played a different sound. As I walked around and listened to these sounds, I was for the first time in my life introduced to gender identities as a sonic form of art and artistically composed as a soundscape. In the middle of the circle, the sounds merged together, creating a landscape of lives that escape the binary thinking of what constitutes gender. Because the sound installation had no images or words (written or spoken), as a listener I was gently pushed to truly hear and listen to the soundscape around me.

When I play this embodied soundtrack, I travel through time and space, but these three seemingly different memories from different places and decades share the common denominator: they are very much gendered experiences. My inspiration and standpoint to this thesis comes from my own listening and how I am attuned to the world through sounds as also experiences of my gender. My thesis also draws from my love of watching films – especially the independent movies that try to look beyond the mainstream presentations of love, sex, gender, loss, anger, and a whole

¹ I use trans* as an umbrella term that encloses multiple identities with the prefix trans in addition to other identities of those who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.

scale of emotions and histories. These films offer me a possibility to imagine and re-imagine, but they offer something on a more personal level too. Through movies, I am able to see representations that mirror the reality I live in and how I have organized my relationships: a place of reflection and identification, I would say. When I started my graduate studies in Fall 2016 in the MALS Women, Gender, and Sexualities Studies Track, I was convinced that sound studies and gender studies must meet each other in my own research. Throughout these pages, I try to explain one way to examine the exciting relationship between these two disciplines.

Before the Oscars last year, I saw infographics that not only stated how the history of winning movies was dominated by male directors and male actors, of course predominantly white, but also how men in the movies did most of the speaking. Their voices and sounds occupied a majority of the lines in the scripts. In 2015, April Reign created a hashtag #OscarsSoWhite on Twitter as a reference “to all marginalized communities” and to ask “inclusive questions when staffing films—from the actors cast to the boom operators and craft-services teams hired” (Reign 2018). With her Twitter campaign, Reign wanted to bring focus on how to operate “outside of the same networks that have been used for years” and instead provide “opportunities to talented craftspeople from groups not usually included” (2018). The white male dominance does mean many things from the lack of diversity and authentic representations of other groups and individuals to the lack of untold stories and technical competence.

Because the filmmakers often bring their own lived experiences to the creative processes, the way the worlds and characters in the films come to existence as bodily, feeling and sensing beings is reflected against the realities of the filmmakers. The body is not a separate entity from our individual or cultural histories, but these histories embodied in us. Vannini et al. centralize both body and senses as foundational aspects of identity through the concept of embodied self. The

authors state that “[t]he embodied self is both the material basis and reflexive outcome of the perceived sensations and sense-making practices” (2012, 85). How our bodies fit in to the world also shapes our understanding of both the world and ourselves: “By recalling and remembering, we shape a sense of self that is deeply unique to each of us, yet common memories are also at the basis of collective identities” (Vannini et al. 2012, 90). If the films we watch are predominantly constituted on the embodied selves of the white men and their senses, we not only lose in visual representations; it has also sonic implications as hearing and listening are equally important senses in literally making sense of the world.

Through sounds I hope to disrupt the relationship and power position between sound and image, where seeing has historically been the privileged mode of knowing. Cobussen et al. discuss new sonic epistemologies as ways to access knowledge that only exist in the form of sound. The authors state that sonic forms of knowledge challenge the “viewpoint and sensory dispositives of western, white and male-dominated cultures” and “gives room to the very specific sensory approaches of other cultures, other subcultures and other individual biographies, with their own particular sensory setup inscribed and embodied in their flesh” (Cobussen et al., 2013).

To focus on other kind of stories and to discuss the importance of diversity not only in what we see but what we hear, I am exploring the phenomenological aspects of sound in the Swedish film *Girls Lost* (2015) and the American film *Tangerine* (2015) in my thesis. These films are portrayals of two very different kinds of transgender lives. *Girls Lost* is a story of three 14-year-old girls in small and anonymous Swedish town. The girls find a way to momentarily transform into boys by drinking the sap of a magical plant. *Tangerine* depicts an eventful Christmas Eve of two friends who are Black transgender women and sex workers in Los Angeles and situates them in “the block,” an area well-known for drugs and sex work. Through these films, I consider sound

through its affective characteristics, possibilities and materiality; that sound has an agency in a story-telling and that sounds actively creates the world and spaces the characters and the listener-viewer inhabit. I examine the ways which sounds mediate the complexity of gender identity, sexuality, race, and friendship in these two films that are explorations of what it means and feels to be a transgender individual.

I draw from Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, which "shows how bodies are gendered, sexualized, and raced by how they extend into spaces, as an extension that differentiates between 'left' and 'right,' 'front' and 'behind,' 'up' and 'down,' as well as 'near' and 'far.' What is offered... is a model of how bodies become oriented by how they take up time and space" (2006, 5). By bringing together queer phenomenology and the phenomenology of sound, I approach sounds not only as extensions of the characters' bodies in *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* but pay attention to how certain sounds narrate the world as part of the characters' gender identities. I investigate the ways which sounds bring the characters' bodies into existence and in my analysis both ask and answer how sounds align and orient the characters as bodily beings into the world. What kind of sounds form auditory spaces of gender and how these sounds either attached or detach the characters from their environment? How do gender identities emerge from the sonic world of the movies and in what kind of realities do they situate the characters? How do sounds shape our understanding of the characters' bodies as gendered, racialized, sexualized? And how do sounds disorient, move and carry the characters not only through their environments, but also their lives?

By examining sounds through the lens of queer phenomenology, I steer into the sonic spatiality of the characters' worlds and bring forth what is usually left behind. *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* are located in two very different types of social, cultural and spatial environments and

soundscapes. *Girls Lost* utilizes the sounds of nature and sounds from the spaces of the girls' everyday lives together with the musical score. I examine and analyze how these sounds create a space of isolation, disconnectedness that can be felt, and the void of the world the girls try to rise toward. Yet at the same time, the echoing ambient sound of the world the girls live in reaches the listener-viewer as almost heart-breaking, a beautiful reminder of the closeness and intimacy that the girls are often more easily allowed to express in their friendships with each other compared to the relations of boys. The girls' bodily presence and sounds attached to their bodies build on the coming-of-age atmosphere: the auditory space between the girls, with its distances and intimacies, discloses the unarticulated questions, anxieties and anticipations about gender and sexuality that the words do not in *Girls Lost*.

Tangerine surrounds the listener-viewer with the loudness of the city: the constant sounds of traffic and cars passing by or humming in the background, the lively conversations and movement on the streets when the characters' high heels take them from one situation and drama to another. In my analysis of *Tangerine*, I examine the concept of noise and want in particular to point out its racialized and social class-related dimensions. In other words, noise is contextual and therefore not always tied to the physical environment or what and who is considered as the source of the noise. I bring into discussions another concept, the "sonic color line," from Jennifer Stoeber. The sonic color line codifies and marks sounds as racialized, yet *Tangerine* deploys these racialized sounds and soundscapes to represent its characters as unapologetic about their existence and the work they do. By listening to the sonic production of the characters in *Tangerine*, I explore the sounds of friendship and sex work as a resistance to the history of silencing.

Each of these movies are also examinations of the transgender body but through very

different terms and very different sounds. I reflect the ideas and sounds related to bodies in both *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* against Talia Mae Bettcher's examination of the "wrong body" discourse, often utilized to legally recognize transgender identities and bodies as valid. In *Girls Lost*, the model is tangibly present as a source of anguish and confusion. In fact, in *Girls Lost* the main character Kim approaches her gender identity first by questioning and through that questioning reaching to the idea of being trapped in a wrong body. Biological ideas and sounds bring to the listener-viewer a certain sense of gender essentialism and Kim's rejection of her body.

Tangerine instead portrays a more complex response to the idea of body as a trap. In my analysis of *Tangerine*, I examine "the block" through Sara Ahmed's articulation of the Orient as a theoretical tool to explore queer phenomenology of race. The Orient is what the white and heterosexual Occident is not and therefore always narrated into existence through such distance. Ahmed states that the distance becomes embodied and sets limits to what the racialized bodies can do or even where they can go. I use the Orient as a fruitful way to examine the block as a spatiality where the transgender women of color are sexualized and sexually desired because of their race and gender identities and therefore for their distance from the Occident. However, in my analysis I challenge the Orient as a place that shapes bodies only through limitations. In *Tangerine*, the block as the Orient is a space of agency and self-definitions that resist the control and ideals of whiteness associated with the West. While *Tangerine* does not deny the harsh reality of sex work as an economic survival strategy for many transgender women of color, the film centralizes the block as an important space for acceptance of gender identities, closeness and friendships. The sounds of the block articulate the bodies with certain sense of freedom and independence.

In both films, I focus on three major themes. In *Girls Lost*, I situate my analysis in the

sounds of distance, longing and loss; the sounds of moments of transformation; and the sounds of mask which in my analysis refers to how masculinity both protects but also hides such things as closeness and intimacy. In *Tangerine*, I examine the sonic world through the sounds of drama, high heels and noise; the sounds of car and sex work; and the musicality of sass and emotions. In both films I explore the crucial moments and scenes that build the sonic world. My focus is on both on diegetic and nondiegetic sounds. Diegetic sounds “help us consider sound that inhabits the created world as physically present within the space of events. Anything outside of the interior space of the film world is called nondiegetic,” referring to musical score and other sounds that the characters do not hear (Batcho, 2014).

In her work on queer phenomenology, Sara Ahmed states that “to make things queer is to disturb the order of things” (2006, 161). Ahmed continues that phenomenology offers a queer angle “by bringing objects to life in their ‘loss’ of place, in the failure of gathering to keep things in their place” (2006, 165). Jack Halberstam echoes this sentiment and argues that “queer studies offer us one method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems” (2011, 89). *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* bring queerness as cinematic aesthetics to the listener-viewer. José Esteban Muñoz captures this relationship between queerness and aesthetic in a rather beautiful manner:

Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity... Turning to the aesthetic in the case of queerness is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations. Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world. (2009, 1)

I am not sure if these movies depict utopian queer futures, but they both aesthetically

articulate the importance of queerness as a shared experience. In *Girls Lost*, this happens through the loss of friendships, and in *Tangerine*, through the closeness of a friendship in a moment of loss. Because of this hope present in the (moment of) loss, I wanted to use Ahmed as my theoretical lens as hope is something her writing evokes in me. And if “traditional” phenomenology in some ways assumes bodies – that they all rise towards the world despite their social limitations like gender and race – Ahmed’s twist on queering phenomenology does the opposite. It brings “what is ‘behind’ to the front... To queer phenomenology is to offer a different ‘slant’ to the concept of orientation itself” (2006, 4). Queer phenomenology faces the back and “look[s] ‘behind’ phenomenology, which hesitates at the sight of the philosopher’s back” (2006, 29).

Such a notion is central in my analysis not only because of the transgender lives *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* aesthetically visualize, but also because sounds and sound design are often considered as background; the sounds in film are something that are not in sight. Yet movies usually are audiovisual entities and therefore the sounds in the background, or that are considered as background, animate the characters to life and offer a fruitful way to examine the complexity of the characters and their lifeworlds. What queer phenomenology does in these films is to bring those backgrounds to the front as stories, images and sounds.

In neither of the movies is the word transgender said out loud nor is its meaning discussed by the characters. Trans* can mean multiple things and it is important to understand that some individuals prefer not to be categorized, some uses gender categories such as trans* to make tangible and visible the violence they experience, and for many, trans* is an umbrella term that covers multiple forms of gender identities outside the cis-gender binary and norms. Susan Stryker sheds light on the history of the word:

The word “transgender” itself, which seems to have been coined in the 1980s, took on its current meaning in 1992 after appearing in the title of a small but influential pamphlet by

Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time has Come*. First usage of the term “transgender” is generally attributed to Virginia Prince, a Southern California advocate for freedom of gender expression.... If a transvestite was somebody who episodically changed into the clothes of the so-called “other sex,” and a transsexual was somebody who permanently changed genitals in order to claim membership in a gender other than the one assigned at birth, then a transgender was somebody who permanently changed social gender through the public presentation of self, without recourse to genital transformation. (2006, 4)

However, transgender and trans* identities are now considered much more fluid, and self-definitions are accepted for example in universities without providing proof of indicating sex correction or name change in legal documents like birth certificates. Stephen Whittle states that “[a] trans identity is now accessible almost anywhere, to anyone who does not feel comfortable in the gender role they were attributed with at birth, or who has a gender identity at odds with the labels ‘man’ or ‘woman’ credited to them by formal authorities” (2006, xi). Transgender identity encloses

a variety of experiences. It can encompass discomfort with role expectations, being queer, occasional or more frequent cross-dressing, permanent cross-dressing and cross-gender living, through to accessing major health interventions such as hormonal therapy and surgical reassignment procedures... Regardless of the fact that trans identities are now more available, the problems of being trans have by no means been resolved. In many parts of the world, having a trans identity still puts a person at risk of discrimination, violence, and even death. (Whittle 2006, xi)

Transgender can also mean an identity that is shared a lived relationship between people who identify through a shared community. Halberstam explains the asterisk after trans* as a way to avoid situating “transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity. The asterisk holds off the certainty of diagnosis; it keeps at bay any sense of knowing in advance what the meaning of this or that gender variant form may be, and perhaps most importantly, it makes trans* people the authors of their own categorizations.” (2018, 4). Trans* and other gender categories like non-binary “have emerged within communities seeking for ways to name and explain their multiplicity: in other words, they

are not medical terms or psychiatric terms produced in institutional contexts either to name disorders or to delimit a field of classification; rather, they are terms that emerge from trial and error, everyday usage, and political expediency” (Halberstam 2018, 10). While trans* resists and defies gender norms, the term has been also utilized in problematic politics that further stigmatize and marginalize the communities and individuals.

I find it crucial to be transparent and open about my own gender identity in my thesis. I am a cis-gender woman and even though I have had serious frustrations and anxieties about the stereotypes related to my gender, especially after moving to New York, I have never really questioned my gender identity. Therefore, I am not trying to comment or evaluate how the authenticity of transgender lives are captured, or not captured, in these two films. I do not have the authority for that. Rather, I listen to how sounds are connected to the characters stories and narratives of gender in *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* and what the characters’ sonic worlds do and do not accomplish: how they help the identities to emerge and how they might also conflate them. I am still very much aware that even with my focus on sounds, I cannot escape the fact that doing a film analysis is a project of interpretation and in some ways also translation. To be sensitive and mindful requires me to reflect on my own limitations in both understanding and articulating trans* experiences.

While the movies and their soundscape touched and moved me deeply, I felt the joy and anguish of the characters and with them, writing about sound is not an easy process. Acknowledging that writing about sound has its hermeneutical risks and admitting that describing sounds textually felt at times impossible, I also felt confident that doing the sounds analysis is important exactly for these reasons. Despite that my interpretation of the film is an (inter)subjective

project, it might also open new thoughts and ideas of what a phenomenological take on sounds can do in the field of gender studies when combined with film as a media.

I begin my exploration with reviewing and laying out my theoretical groundings in Chapter II. By focusing on how phenomenology comes together with queer phenomenology and sound studies, I address the ways which sounds enclose affective qualities and potentialities to examine sounds in relation to gender and how sounds can offer new insights to the discussion of trans* visibility and representation. In Chapter III I focus on *Girls Lost* and how sounds can detach, remove, disconnect and isolate both the listener-viewer and the characters of the film. I analyze how such a strategy both successfully and tangibly portrays feelings of exclusion and loss while at the same co-opts a discourse that defines transgender identity merely as a bodily distress. In Chapter IV I discuss *Tangerine* as a meaningful example of how sounds can locate transgender identities to their cultural, material and economic locations, while at the same time giving agency and meaning to resist silencing. I bring the films together in my concluding discussion in Chapter V by thinking about what sounds can offer as a methodological and theoretical tool in film analysis of gender and gender identities.

CHAPTER II

Theory Review

When I think of sound theory, I often find myself repeating the clever opening lines from Casey O’Callaghan and Matthew Nudds in *Sounds & Perception: New Philosophical Essays*: “We evaluate *views*, have *insights*, and see what is at *issue*. Perhaps most telling is the greater fear many admit at the prospect of losing sight over any other sense” (2009, 1). The authors state that philosophy of perception has focused almost solely on vision: “visual information... occupies a privileged epistemic role, and our language frequently reflects a tight coupling of seeing with knowing” (2009, 1). How to imagine and re-imagine world differently are often central discussions in social sciences and gender studies; yet we rarely stop to consider what that world would be as sounded and re-sounded. The interest in the senses as experiences of existence emerged in the 1980s in the field of cultural anthropology, but considerations of the relationship between gender and sounds have remained fairly unresearched despite that sounds, and listening and hearing, guide our actions and daily lives that are full of sonic cues and constructions.

Our reactions to sounds can be rather bodily. As Wolfgang Welsch argues, “[h]earing is characterised by infiltration, vulnerability, exposure. We have eyelids, but no ear-lids. When hearing, we are unprotected. Hearing is a sense of extreme passibility, and when stormed by acoustics we cannot escape” (cited in Schrödl 2012, 89). Body is also the central tool of perception in phenomenology. In his founding work on phenomenology of perception, Maurice Merleau-Ponty critiques the Cartesian body/mind split and argues that our bodies are not just physical presentations of us, but our bodies are touched, shaped, and formed by the knowledge and experience of the very existence. Perception shapes our bodies and our places in the world.

The phenomenological world is not pure being, but rather the sense that shines forth at the intersection of my experiences and at the intersection of my experiences with those of

others through a sort of gearing into each other. The phenomenological world is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which establish their unity through the taking up [*la reprise*] of my past experiences into my present experiences, or of the other person's experience into my own. (2012, xxxvi)

In Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, our bodies take active roles in their existence: the world is in front and we meet it with anticipation. "Around the human world that each of us has fashioned, there appears a general world to which we must first belong in order to be able to enclose ourselves within a particular milieu of a love or an ambition" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 86).

By stating that "I can only understand the function of the living body by accomplishing it and to the extent that I am a body that rises up toward the world," Merleau-Ponty invites to think about the habitual body that has accumulated over time a sense of itself and the actual body that is a body in present (2102, 78). Yet, we are never just a present body, as bodies have their own histories with knowledge of sensations. The body provides a perspective on the world by filtering and mapping sensations and Merleau-Ponty offers a multisensory understanding of the surrounding world:

I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, inspect them, and walk around them. But when it comes to my body, I never observe it itself. I would need a second body to be able to do so, which would itself be unobservable. When I say that I always perceive my body, these words must not be understood in a merely statistical sense, and there must be something in the presentation of one's own body that renders its absence, or even its variation, inconceivable. (2012, 93)

Merleau-Ponty articulates a different kind of understanding of sight: one that is not objectifying and where the concept of sight is tactile – the sight is a touch.

Merleau-Ponty emphasises the fact that body is not just a representation and it is not composed of individual parts with individual functions, but body is an entity that cannot be divided into individual bodily functions:

my body appears to me as a posture toward a certain task, actual or possible. And in fact my body's spatiality is not... a positional spatiality; rather, it is a situational spatiality. If I stand

in front of my desk and lean on it with both hands, only my hands are accentuated and my whole body trails behind them like a comet's tail. I am not unaware of the location of my shoulders or my waist; rather, this awareness is enveloped in my awareness of my hands and my entire stance is read, so to speak, in how my hands lean upon the desk. (2012, 102)

The situational spatiality refers to a consciousness of the surrounding world where the habitual body, the body with history, responds to its situationality through its knowledge of sensation: “How the body inhabits space...can be seen more clearly by considering the body in motion because movement is not content with passively undergoing space and time, it actively assumes them, it takes them up in their original signification that is effaced in the banality of established situations” (2012, 105).

Ahmed complicates the notion of the general world where the body gains the sense of itself. She examines the heteronormativity of such world and questions the lines we follow that are supposed to align us to the world. Ahmed states that “orientation involves aligning body and space: we only know which way to turn once we know which way we are facing” and the familiarity of the world “is an effect of inhabitance; we are not simply in the familiar, but rather the familiar is shaped by actions that are already within reach,” yet “we still have to reach for those things for them to be reached” (2006, 7). Orientations are “about the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places...The body provides us with a perspective: the body is ‘here’ as a point from which we begin, and from which the world unfolds, as being both more and less over there” (2006, 8). What orients bodies is their “responsiveness to the world around them” and capacity to be affected: bodies are “shaped by their dwelling and take shape by dwelling” (2006, 8-9).

Body becomes oriented by lining itself with the directions in the space it inhabits. We follow certain lines that align us, that orient our bodies. Ahmed states that those lines “are both created by being followed and are followed by being created” (2006, 16). These directing lines are performative: “They depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken,

but they are also created as an effect of this repetition... we find our way and we know which direction we face only as an effect of work, which is often hidden from us” (Ahmed 2006, 16). My analysis of sounds in *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* is a response, reflection and continuum to these ideas that bodies are not just physical presentations of us, but our bodies are touched, shaped, and formed by the knowledge and experience of their very existence. I think of sounds as these performative directing lines in the lifeworlds of the movie characters and their narratives, but also how sounds as the environment and auditory space create bodies as gendered and how such notions of gender are guided and “articulated” sonically. The sounds in these two films in many ways guide towards the understanding of what is in reach for the characters in relation to their transgender identities; that sounds are like paths that either take somewhere or that end suddenly and disrupt not only the characters’ lives, but the relationship and synchrony between image and sound.

Ahmed states that we often provide a background information, what is behind, of the people whose stories we tell: “So, if phenomenology is to attend to the background, it might do so by giving an account of the conditions of emergence for something, which would not necessarily be available in how that thing presents itself to consciousness” (2006, 38). In my analysis sounds then narrate to the listener-viewer what is not always readily available; what are the conditions of emergence of being trans*, feeling desire, connection and disconnection, friendship and community, love and loss in *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine*. Sounds as backgrounds reveal also the material, cultural and even emotional conditions – or removal of them – which through the identities are negotiated. What Ahmed adds to Merleau-Ponty in my film analysis are these layers: bodies are not just a habitual bodies that take active roles in their lives, but there is also the background – background sounds that I attend to in my analysis – that affects the characters

understanding of their bodily capacities, sensations, and how they can align themselves in the world as gendered beings and transgender individuals.

Sounds carry meanings and memories and therefore creative potentialities to analyze and understand phenomenology through the sonic dimensions of the world that body rises toward. We pick up sensory cues and assign both individual and culturally shared meanings and epistemic significance to the very specific sounds that surround us. We remember sounds and through sounds: sounds can be anything from comforting, exciting, nostalgic, scary to a reminder of trauma. Steven Feld termed the practice of studying sounds and listening as acoustemology in the early 1980s referring to acoustic knowing – knowing by sound – as “local conditions of acoustic sensation, knowledge, and imagination embodied in the culturally particular sense of place” (1996, 91). Our senses are culturally constituted (we are all differently attuned to the world) and similarly our social relations are constituted through sensuous experiences (see Porcello et al. 2010).

Walter Gershon argues that sounds resonate in our bodies: Instead of just being heard, sounds are felt and can be “understood to form educational systems of knowledge that not only make previously hidden understandings audible” but can be utilized to “interpret the ordinarily sensible, everyday acts of sensemaking” (Gershon 2013, 258). George Revill’s characterization of sound speaks for its multi-dimensional nature:

Sound is at once medium – the sensuous stuff through which the world is experienced; method – processes of resonance and the practices of embodied and reflexive engagement, hearing and listening which engage the world; and modality – the structure or sensory registers through which the world is engaged, connecting entities and animating experience in its meaningfulness (2016, 245).

Owing to this fluid nature of sounds, they can be manipulated and be a form of manipulation of place and space. The propagation of sounds “goes beyond individual bodies, contributing to the atmosphere or ambience of a space” (Gallagher 2016, 44). Because “the perception and

understanding of sound registering with and in the listener has critical importance in the making of sounds as events in time and space,” sound is “simultaneously cause and effect, product and process, intermediary and mediated world” (Revill 2016, 245).

The phenomenology of sound could be characterized as a result of what sounds creates as a sphere and how space is made by the qualities of the sound. Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan call this auditory space:

The essential feature of sound... is not its location, but that it be, that it fill space. We say ‘the night shall be filled with music,’ just as the air is filled with fragrance; locality is irrelevant... Auditory space has no point of favored focus. It's a sphere without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing the thing. It is not pictorial space, boxed in, but dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment. It has no fixed boundaries; it is indifferent to background. The eye focuses, pinpoints, abstracts, locating each object in physical space, against a background; the ear, however, favors sound from any direction. (1960, 67)

I want to approach this statement from two perspective. Firstly, by allowing this notion of sounds filling the space and playing with location to guide my analysis, I listen to the auditory space between the characters and their environment; taking seriously what Ahmed articulates, I investigate how sounds in that space orient and align the characters by telling something crucial about their bodies and relationships with each other and to their environment.

However, I disagree that locality is irrelevant and that auditory space has no point or favored focus. While sounds are unfixed without tangible boundaries and therefore give creative space for imagination to work, in my analysis of *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* I reject the notion that sounds are abstract and indifferent to the background. I emphasize the spatiality and locality of sounds as tangible representations of conditions from where the characters’ transgender identities emerge. By centralizing sounds through their ability to situate the characters in places and spaces that are meaningful and important for them, the sounds enclose local knowledge as epistemologies that defy the abstraction of sound by Carpenter and McLuhan.

Before I say a few things about the sound design, I must state that I am not in fact that interested in the process or project of sound design per se or sounds as a commentary of the content that requires interrogation of the filmmakers' motives. I am intrigued by the interpretative possibilities of sounds as narratives of and from the characters and how the sounds offer alternative forms to examine the world-making and character-building in a media that is first and foremost considered as visual. In other words, it is the constitutive potential of sounds that fascinates me in my analysis.

The premise of my film analysis is then the idea that sounds and sound design is in the background but also background knowledge of the characters. Kevin Donnelly's articulation of occult sound in film is a rather apt way to approach the sonic queer phenomenology in *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine*. By occult, Donnelly refers to sound that is unapparent, or not immediately apparent, even mysterious: "The term can be used to describe any hidden workings or processes that are unable to be observed" (2014, 72). Sound design often is "one of the hidden aspects of film in criticism and analysis, where it has often been treated as something that is not quite real and of little import next to the seemingly all-important image" (2014, 3).

Occult resonates with queer phenomenology by giving account of what is behind: "there is also something occult about the process generally, where two radically different media can be fused in perception, generating something that is infinitely more than the sum of its parts" (2014, 4). Ahmed discusses the body as the beginning and place from where the world unfolds, that bodies are oriented their responsiveness to the world, and Donnelly echoes this sentiment. He suggests that occult sound "can be approached as an abstract, unconscious, and aesthetic drama, where film might play out momentary and instinctual understandings of and responses to the world" and

depending if the relationship between image and sound is synchronized or not, the sounds make space for both harmony and ambiguity (2014, 75).

Similarly, James Batcho examines the unfixed qualities of sound in phenomenological exploration of sound design in animation. The approach “is an effort to stretch the narrative possibilities in the form by re-conceptualizing how we hear, listen to and experience invented worlds... What we identify with in any good story is the way that we come to absorb the world through our experience of it” (2014). A phenomenological approach to sound “moves us further away from the demands of rational, universal, external things and closer to the particular manner in which sonic events disclose themselves to a particular consciousness” (Batcho, 2014). Batcho’s model of creating an experience of the world by listening to the animated characters describes the possibilities of sound design that can also benefit character development in non-animated films, but similarly, as I discuss through my analysis of *Girls Lost*, sounds can co-opt already existing discourses of gender and sexuality and therefore embody notions of essentialism.

Watching a movie constitutes an intersubjectivity between the listener-viewer and the film characters. The audience, the listener-viewer, focuses on “a particular character and her mode of being-in-the-world as a hearing individual” and “we hear for and even as the character with whom we should connect. In the phenomenological approach, we as audience experience the world and other beings as the character does” (Batcho, 2014). Each person, as a listener, carries an ideological package that transforms the conveyed message. Tripta Chandola explores these sonic sensibilities and listening as a research methodology that could help decoding already mapped places and areas – both literally and figuratively (2013, 59).

In Chandola’s analysis, “listening is proactive, engaged hearing, while hearing is

disempowered listening. The listener–hearer relationship is a ‘monologue of power’ where the hearer cannot participate in shaping or altering sonic acts and their articulations” (2013, 60). Chandola powerfully argues that “positions of listener and hearer are politically informed, and thus are significant in determining the permissions of sonic production, performance and articulation available to a group, individual or community” (2013, 60). Such notions of politics of listening made me (re)consider my own listening of the movies and what social and cultural aspects have informed my listening practices, but Chandola also functions as theoretical lens to examine if and how *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* challenge the political positions of sonic production.

Because listening is a subjective and culturally informed practice, gender is one of those aspects informing not only what we hear, but how we hear. Järviluoma et al. focus on gender in their methodological exploration of film and sound as gender “helps us further in considering the multiple ways in which people both consciously and unconsciously use sounds in creating their meaningful lived spaces, rather than just passively succumbing to the sonic circumstances as victims of ‘noise’” (2003, 104). Musical score in films, and music in general, “connects the perceiver to the processes of producing and reproducing meanings and ideologies” that are “interwoven with the identifications of the perceiver. Identifications come into being through negotiation of a range of social factors,” such as gender, race, and sexuality (Järviluoma et al. 2003, 87). Music is one of the shaping tools for the multiple ways people experience for example their bodies, desires, and emotions because “[m]usic - and sounds in general - are central forces in the construction of self” (Järviluoma et al. 2003, 88).

The relationship between image and film is often gendered through the binary understanding, stereotypes and attributes attached to what it means to be either a woman or a man. Drawing from Anahid Kassabian’s work *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary*

Hollywood Film Music (2001) and Kassabin's exploration of television title tunes, Järviluoma et al. explain that "[p]articular aspects of the music... were clearly associated with women - for instance, harmoniousness and the countryside; and certain aspects with men - force, urban environments and guns. Kassabian noticed that the associations corresponded to the early feminist theory dichotomizing 'nature/women' versus 'culture/men'" (2003, 90). Looking and listening into "which kind of gender is evoked by mood music, how different elements of the film, its characters and scenes are gendered by music and how gender connotations evoked by music comment upon different scenarios of the film" is a fruitful way to understand gender in film analysis through sound (Järviluoma et al. 96).

Girls Lost and *Tangerine* tell about difference that emerges from gender and that difference is entangled with sounds that move and remove the characters and their bodies in and from their surrounding worlds. The listener-viewer is confronted with scenes – with moments – where they create both sonic proximities and distances. The listener-viewer might not first encounter the sonic worlds of the characters with meaning, but rather let the sounds sink in and allow them touch. Gallagher et al. discuss the meaning-making process of sounds as nuanced and complex: "Before sounds become meaningful in a conscious, rational sense, listening bodies find themselves caught up in sound, moving with its movements, dancing to its tune" (2017, 1250). The meaning-making process itself is a subjective experience in a sense that the sound as affect and sound as meaning(ful) are interconnected, they "blend and blur into each other" (Gallagher et al. 2017, 1250).

This does not mean that sounds are always meaningful: "Meaning is as much something we bring to sound as something that sound brings to us. Sound need not 'mean' anything at all, and yet it can still have profound effects of power" (Gallagher et al. 2017, 1251). I want to highlight this

aspect of meaning and the affective quality of sounds as the idea of listening bodies takes us back to Merleau-Ponty and Ahmed. The listening bodies are bodies with individual histories, aligned to and disoriented by the surrounding world; the body is an interpreting and meaning-making tool – a filter that is shaped by what it hears and how it hears. We do not only watch movies, but we hear them with our bodily and embodied maps.

Because I am examining two films that focus on transgender lives and identities, I want to dedicate a section of thoughts and theory on how such representations are produced. The visibility of trans* bodies and experiences in TV shows and movies is now greater than ever, but how these stories come to exist is not without problems. One of the biggest conversations is concerned with the casting, as the trend seems to be that cis-gender actors are playing transgender roles especially in the mainstream movies and shows. Another big question concerns of course who gets to write these stories, other than white cis-gender men and women, and what kind of representations of trans* individuals these media formats decide to both create and see as valuable (read: marketable). While all representations are important, focusing only on the white and middle-class lives is an erasure of stories of trans* people of color and stories that reflect other than middle-class ways of being trans*.

A conversation of its own is also trans* visibility and what it really means and which I will discuss shortly. I was a teenager when I saw my first movie of a transgender person, Brandon Teena, in *Boys Don't Cry* in 1999, which is based on a true story and is still a breakthrough in the genre. Halberstam summarizes the brief history of films transgender individuals:

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, some films were in circulation that took the transgender body as their topic or that deployed the transgender body as a metaphor for other unstable forms of identity. But most films featuring trans* identities still cast transgenderism as a kind of aberration, as something in need of explanation, or as a symbol for illegible social identities. That said, in the 1990s mainstream cinema parted ways with the tendency to represent transgender people as mad, bad, and dangerous. (2018, 92)

In 2012, GLAAD catalogued trans* representations in film for the past ten years and concluded that “offensive representations and storylines were found on every major broadcast network and seven different cable networks, demonstrating that the problem remains widespread.” Similarly, transgender characters were disproportionately cast in roles of victims, killers or villains, trans* characters occupation depicted as sex work, and “[a]nti-transgender slurs, language and dialogue was present in at least 61% of the catalogued episodes and storylines” (GLAAD 2012).

Because representations of trans* lives often focus on the trans* bodies, the risk of reductive, insulting, and essentializing portrayal is often present. Halberstam states that representing trans* bodies risk also sensationalizing trans* bodies, with idea that there is something to reveal, through nakedness or through exposure for example of violence (2018, 89). Approaching trans* bodies require different ways to both represent and understand them. As an example, Halberstam discusses of Jeanne Vacarro who “has offered the experience of touch as an alternative method for reading trans* bodies...a logic of knowing that departs totally from the diagnostic forms of classification that have mediated trans* people’s ability to say who they are” (2018, 90). Touch as an alternative method nods towards Merleau-Ponty who understands sight as touch, something haptic, the kind of sight that refuses to objectify. Similarly, Ahmed considers bodies through their capacity to be affected which does not directly mean touch, but in my film analysis I consider the affective potentiality of sounds as something that touch and move the characters’ bodies.

What then does trans* visibility mean in relation to the representation and how does films function as messengers? *Transparent* is a good example of one the first mainstream tv-shows that reached wider audience and that was critically acclaimed for its casting and trans* representation. As Halberstam points out, “*Transparent* made the wise decision to work with trans people’s own

narratives rather than to cleave faithfully to Jill Soloway's autobiographical story... her father's transition" (2018, 98). *Transparent* is a series that "stand[s] out from previous trans representations: it is not committed to repairing the negative facets of representations of transgenderism, for example, but it also refuses to situate the trans* body as a lonely and singular entity. Rather, the trans* characters...all appear in relation to and firmly within real-world events" (Halberstam 2018, 98).

Yet, the show is not embraced by everyone and it has received criticism for cis-gender actor Jeffrey Tambor playing the part of transgender woman Maura. Similarly, the transgender audience has criticized Jill Soloway, who is not a transgender, for writing a transgender story. Halberstam however praises the show for beautifully showing "how the bourgeois family expands to embrace its own, even when its 'own' is an aging patriarch turned transwoman, and it gives audiences a warts-and-all view into trans* life" (2018, 98-99). There is still lot of work to do with how trans* parts are written and who gets to play the roles. Or as Jeffrey Tambor said when he accepted his second Emmy Award for the role: "one more thing, I would not be unhappy were I the last cisgender male playing a female transgender on television. We have work to do" (Halberstam 2018, 99).

Behind trans* visibility is a noble idea that people would become more understanding and accepting towards people who are trans*. Shon Faye however reminds that there "has been a 45% rise in transphobic hate crime last year, and two in five trans people have experienced a hate crime or incident in the past year" (2018). Faye states that "when trans people are elevated to visibility, not everyone's reaction is to be kind... many people's reaction on seeing confident and successful trans people with the same sense of entitlement to public space as everyone else is to be angry or threatened" (2018). Representation is only a one tactic that should not and "cannot replace trans

people's full inclusion and participation in broader social movements like feminism, anti-racism and trade unionism" (Faye 2018). Trans* oppression includes also police brutality, homelessness and targets the harshest the most marginalized people of the society to which representation is hardly a solution (Faye 2018).

What trans* visibility means both as a word and practice is not without problems either. Alok Vaid-Menon states that such visibility is "an oxymoron. Trans is who we are, not what we look like. We shouldn't have to look like anything in particular in order to be believed for who we are. Visibility often is a form of (nonconsensual) labor that we have to do in order to make our experiences coherent to others" (2016). Vaid-Menon continues that trans* visibility is a cis framework and asks "[w]ho are we becoming visible for? Why do we have to become visible in order to be taken seriously? Non-trans people will congratulate themselves for our visibility but will not mention how they are the ones (sic) were responsible for erasing us in the first place" (2016).

Trans* visibility does not always come without a cost. Vaid-Menon argues that visibility "often means incorporation. Often the only way we are respected as 'legitimately' trans is if we appeal to dominant norms of beauty, gender, race, and establishment politics" (2016). Trans* visibility can also co-opt what Vaid-Menon calls conditional acceptance that is "is part of a historic pattern where dominant groups only accept marginalized groups for their own selfish interests, not out of a practice of justice. Identification should not be a prerequisite for justice" (2018). This means that LGBT people must convince cis-gender straight people that they are just alike "because by & large cis straight people have only extended sympathy in so much as they can see themselves in us" (Vaid-Menon 2018). Vaid-Menon powerfully states that "[c]onditional acceptance is not justice. This isn't what freedom looks like — having to disappear our difference. This ends up

hurting all trans people because acceptance is dependent on conformity, not simply for being” (2018).

I want to circle back to the beginning to draw together my theory review and what queer phenomenology together with sound phenomenology can do to address the complexity of gender and transgender identities in film. Sound studies of gender and sound analysis of films that focuses on gender and sexuality are still very much unexplored areas. I believe that one reason for this is that we do not associate sounds with meaning when we think of what is meaningful in our lives. Another reason is that sonic forms of knowledge exist outside the historically valued and privileged modes of knowing and institutions that produce knowledge of human life. Yet, as I have discussed through my theory review, sounds are part of our everyday lives and music can be an important medium for self-expression and identification.

Drawing from Merleau-Ponty’s idea of tactile sight and Ahmed’s articulation of bodies that are shaped by their dwelling places and capacity to be affected, I bring these ideas together with the notions of sounds as spaces, localities, emotions and meanings attached to gender. Focusing on sounds offers an alternative way to understand transgender identities and representations related to them, I also challenge the visibility of trans* visibility and how bodies become represented in *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* – and films in general.

CHAPTER III

Dwelling in the Ambient Paths of Gender: Magical Soundscapes of *Girls Lost*

Introduction to *Girls Lost*

I often think of my teenage years with warmth. I was 14 years old, just like the main characters in *Girls Lost*, when I bonded with a girl from my high school and soon became best friends with her. She still is one of the most important persons in my life and even though we do not get to see each other too often, we remember our adventures, goofiness and the closeness we felt already as teenagers every time we do. Our friendship made me feel like I belong somewhere – it still does. But we were also girls with insecurities and relied on each other's existence to find our own places, just like Kim, Momo and Bella do in *Girls Lost*.

Girls Lost is directed and written by Alexandra-Therese Keining and the film came out in 2015. It is based on Jessica Schiefauer's young adult novel *Pojkarna (Boys)* published in 2011. The musical score is composed by Sophia Ersson, but the soundtrack includes also three songs from Fever Ray, a queer Swedish artist known for her feminist approach to music. The language of the film is Swedish, which I understand slightly better than speak (which is not that much), and I relied on the English subtitles to make most of the plot and the film experience.

Girls Lost is a story of three 14-year-old girls Kim, Momo, and Bella, who are close friends. Already the early scenes of the movies make it rather clear that Kim and Momo have romantic feelings for each other and that Kim's gender assigned at birth causes her distress. When Bella finds an unknown seed in a box of seed she has bought to grow in her greenhouse, the girls decide to plant the seed and wait to see what happens. The flower blossoms soon and the three friends decide to ceremonially drink its sweet sap unaware of the plant's magical abilities. Kim,

Momo and Bella have been violently bullied by their male peers at school but find a new kind of confidence after the magical sap turn the girls into boys for overnight.

Kim finds herself being drawn to the magical qualities of the flower and starts longing for the transformation after the first magical experience. The magic helps Kim to both figure out but also complicate her gender identity through the night-long transformations. As a boy, Kim bonds with another boy called Tony. Their friendship builds on minor mischiefs and risk-taking, but they also come to share an intimate connection when they realize that they are attracted to each other. Tony is however troubled by his sexuality and eventually leaves Kim both emotionally and physically beaten.

I want to contextualize the film a bit through an interview Keining gave to *Interview Magazine*. Benjamin Lindsay, who interviewed Keining and wrote the article, states that the film is “[r]ife with tender meditations on trans identity, sexuality, and gender performativity” (2015). *Girls Lost* as a film genre represents magical realism and Keining reveals that the inspiration to do the film came from the producer’s suggestion to transform the YA novel *Pojkarna* into a screenplay: “I hadn’t read it at the time, so when I read it, I became really fascinated with the whole magical realism of it. I never read a story like that before. I think it’s truly unique. I also wanted the screenplay and ultimately the film to be really original” (Lindsay 2015).

Keining wanted to add her own understanding of gender to the film. Lindsay asks what it was like to tackle the queer theme of Kim identifying as a trans* male, to which Keining answers: “At the time, I was reading Judith Butler and I was very intrigued by the idea of gender performativity. I thought that would be something that really applied to this film and to the whole theme of it. I think that’s definitely one of the things that made me want to make the film because it’s such an important issue. I don’t feel that we’ve made enough stories or enough films about that

issue” (2015). Lindsay is interested also about the transformation itself in the film and states that when “we look to the other girls, Bella and Momo. They don’t feel like they were born in the wrong body, but they still find joy in switching genders. What was that about?” Keining answers: “I think their transformation could’ve been equal to being transformed into superheroes or something like that. They don’t feel the same freedom that Kim is experiencing” (Lindsay 2015). Keining also discusses the casting of the actors, as the producers originally “wanted the same person to play both the female and the male character of Kim as well as the other girls, and I was opposed to that right from the beginning. I really wanted the whole transition to be fulfilled and to be as realistic as possible—to actually change from one gender to another” (2015). For the casting, Keining visited schools and both the girls and boys who play the roles of Kim, Momo and Bella are non-actors with no previous acting experience (Lindsay 2015).

I want to bring this interview into discussion as both Lindsay and Keining use some problematic language, such as the idea of wrong body and “changing gender” in the context that *Girls Lost* is a representation of a trans* youth and because they both seem to agree on this terminology. I understand that it is in some ways impossible to avoid such language as the transformation in the film is physical and magical: the girls’ bodies transform to become anatomically different. However, Keining’s notions of performativity, with such a restrictive use of language related to gender, creates an ambiguity. Keining’s choice of words still put together notions of biological sex and its implications and limitations to how one can identify as a gendered being.

According to Jessica Schiefauer, the book deploys more complex and nuanced understanding of all its characters and their gender through its story of puberty and bodily changes:

I was inspired by the question of what it means for me to have a woman’s body, and not a man’s. How does it affect my scope of action, how does it impact my choices? It made me

think back to my teenage years and puberty, when a girl's body changes and becomes a woman's. This new body attracts different kinds of gazes, and many of these gazes are objectifying and sexualizing, regardless of what you personally want. I wanted to give Kim, Bella and Momo a way out of this, I wanted to give them a door that leads outside of reality. They don't have the power to change how they are viewed themselves, but I could at least give them the power to step out of the bodies that attracted those gazes. (Vogel 2014)

Similarly, Kim's identity as a transgender boy is less obvious and deliberate project in the book:

While I was writing, I kept coming back to the word "gaze." Perhaps it isn't the girl/woman body itself that makes Kim feel hopeless, but rather how those around her see her as a result of it. I think that identity is very much shaped by what people *believe* about you. The gazes in your environment and prejudices sort of take root under the skin, and teenagers especially have a hard time working against that, I think. For me, the three girls represent three different ways of contending with the term "gender." Kim's starting point is "I refuse to be looked at this way", and her solution is to take off the body that's being looked at and wearing another. *Pojkarna (The Boys)* became a story about gender and transformation, but that was something that developed while I was writing. (Vogel 2014)

I obviously cannot put the film and the book in dialogue, but I believe Schiefauer's take on her original story is worth mentioning and reflecting on thematically. In the mainstream discourse and media, such as movies of transgender lives, the idea that one is born in the wrong body often repeats as a tautology. Gender dysphoria is often used interchangeably with body dysmorphia while they mean two completely different things. Gender dysphoria "is the distress or discomfort that occurs when the gender someone is assigned does not align with their actual gender" (Finch 2015). Similarly, not all trans* folks experience gender dysphoria which as an offspring off Western medicine has placed "the lives of trans people into an 'illness' framework" and "ultimately stigmatized their identities... The medical model disempowered trans people. Trans people were treated as deviants with a shameful mental disorder, and language like 'gender identity disorder' and 'gender dysphoria' is tied to that history" (Finch 2015).

Talia Mae Bettcher discusses this harmful concept of "wrong body" as a model that

acknowledges transgender as real and lived identity and reality, but contributes to the oppression through its narrow and medical definitions: “The wrong body involves a misalignment between gender identity and the sexed body. This idea developed in the context of sexology, medicine, and psychiatry (facilitated by technological developments)” (2013, 383). The model has two version and in the weaker one, being transgender is seen as a medical condition one is born with “and then, through genital reconstruction surgery, becomes a woman or a man (in proper alignment with an innate gender identity)” (2013, 383). In the stronger version, “one’s real sex is determined by gender identity. On the basis of this native identity one affirms that one has always really been the woman or a man that one claims to be. In both versions, one is effectively a man or woman ‘trapped in the wrong body’” (2013, 383).

Girls Lost in many ways clings on to this idea of the wrong body, but the way Kim, Momo and Bella inhabit the world both as boys and girls, how the world welcomes or rejects them, also tells a story of the limitations, violence, bullying and confusion of both identifying and being identified as a teenage girl. Central to the film is the girls’ friendship, but also how their friendship changes through Kim’s search for and struggle with her gender identity. I am reluctant to use the word struggle, but as the word in some ways describes the events set in motion after the girls drink the magical sap, I will leave it there. *Girls Lost* also tells a story where Kim finally accepting herself unsettles the relationships not only between the friends, but also between the surrounding world and its order.

Kim, Momo and Bella carry as embodied memories the confidence they experience as boys through a different perspective to the world and its limitations. The magical transformations functions as horizon to a world where the girls are not just passive objects but, through their physical presence as boys, take on agentive roles. For Kim, this not a temporary possibility but an

answer to the unnamed and unarticulated feelings she is coming to terms with and naming out loud after experimenting with the magic. Kim is the central character in the movie and while her friendship with Momo and Bella is important, *Girls Lost* leaves their individual stories in the background or gives less attention to their individual feelings. My analysis builds around Kim and her search for belonging and finding her true gender identity and how this travels through the friendships. For the sake of clarity and in order to avoid repetition and acknowledging that this kind of gendering is far from sensitive, I will refer to Kim with a pronoun she/her/hers when she is a girl, hence not altered by the magic, and he/him/his when she is transformed to a boy as a result of drinking the magical sap.

Sounds of Distance, Longing, and Loss

The skin connects as well as contains. The nonopposition between the bodies that move arounds objects, and objects around which bodies move, shows us how orientations involve at least a two-way 'approach,' or the 'more than one' of an encounter. Orientations are tactile and they involve more than one skin surface...Bodies are hence shaped by the contact with objects and with others, with 'what' is near enough to be reached. Bodies even take shape through such contact, or take shape of that contact. (Ahmed, 2006, 54)

Girls Lost is situated in a very small anonymous Swedish town by the water. Wherever Kim, Momo and Bella go in their hometown and narrow territory, the forest and nature in general seem to surround those places. It is early fall, most likely August, as the school has already started but the nature is still green and weather warm. In fact, the girls' hometown reminds me a lot of my own in the neighboring country Finland. I played in the forest roaming freely as the small and rather quiet city was safe and meeting friends outdoors without any parental supervision was a rule and not an exception. I try to think through the nature elements more thoroughly in the next section

that focuses on the sounds of transformations but want to build the mental and physical image of the environment where the movie takes place already in the beginning of my analysis.

The beginning of the movie portrays the positively striking closeness of the girls' friendship and the film utilizes the physical closeness of the girls' bodies to deliver such intimacy to the listener-viewer. *Girls Lost* begins with ambient and ethereal music and a scene of Kim and Momo diving underwater and around each other. Their pliable bodily movements coalesce into one. These slow movements are shaped by the water and together with the ambient music set tone, or tune, for their relationship. While the music paints a picture of harmony, it is also a fragile sound; whatever it symbolizes could be broken easily.

Besides that Kim, Momo and Bella share spatial nearness as neighbors, the listener-viewer can spot the girls holding each other's hands, holding each other, hugging, and bodily comforting each other in the moments of sorrow throughout the movie. These touches are both friendly and caring, but also hint at the romantic and sexual connection between Kim and Momo. When Kim, Momo and Bella embody their girl bodies, their sonic world is often narrated through music and muffled sounds. The thematic sonic world places the girls somewhere else, somewhere in the distance, even when the girls are physically there in that very moment. The music that seems to almost envelope Kim, Mom and Bella and their bodies signify their friendship as bodily shared experience. I would like to think that such introduction to the girls and their friendship in some ways evoke ideas of bodily similarities; or that an idea that these bodies are right and belong together because of these shared capacities and similarities. This line of thought is tangibly present in those moments when Kim's longing to be in the male body achieved by magic start to shatter their friendship.

In one the first scenes of the movie, a boy in the school yard calls Kim, Momo and Bella

lesbians as they bike to the yard. The girls hold each other's hands when they enter the school hallway and the background sounds of other students talking starts to sound muffled and filtered: the sounds move into a distance, and the heavy, nervous breathing of the girls takes the place. "No ugly cunts allowed," says one of the boys in the hallway and stops the girls. When the boy hits Kim down on the floor and Momo and Bella call her name in a deep worry, the words start to distance again, the sounds echo and an eerie tune plays in the background.

The sound of ringing bell gets twisted and muffled and transforms into a peeping sound that reminds of a radio transmission: when something is about to be broadcasted but the sound is interfered. The transmission sound transitions the listener-viewer to the next scene and Kim back to her room. It is evening and she is crying in front of the mirror. The beeping sound of transmission still playing in the background with eerie and haunting sounds echoing together with it, Kim's face twists like in pain, she takes deep breaths while her hand touching the mirror pushes its surface so hard that it makes a faint squeaking sound. Kim quietly sobs in the bed, clock ticking somewhere. She is angry.

The first visual cues suggesting that Kim might be questioning her gender identity are in her mirror and room. While she cries, she looks at pictures of Jim Morrison, Grace Jones and David Bowie; all three of them known for fluid expression of gender. But also through the sounds of discomfort, such as the transmission and crying, emerge the first notions of Kim's trans* identity: Kim's anxiety is expressed through the unpleasant sounds or irritating soundscape almost as these sounds would be messages or responses from her body. At the same time, these sounds are the cues related to the idea that she is born in the wrong body. Yet, the dissociating sonic world of is also shared by the girls because of their gender, gendered bodies and position as victims of bullying. The sounds create a distance that sonically transforms into a space where the girls hold on

to each other and their friendship; the girls are safe and the safety is shaped by the girls when they are together alone and alone together.

The movie is an insight to the girls' lives without focus on their parents and relationships to adults. Bella has lost her mother when she was young (her words), but her father is still mourning and a brief glimpse to his depression seems to be there only to point out the loss and Bella's role as head of the household. Yet, does the sonic world reflect this independence seemingly given to the characters is a question the listener-viewer is left to tackle together with other concerns about the agency given or not given to the girls. The girls feel some sort of helplessness or lack of control over their lives in the environments shared by their male peers. Before any of the magical events happen, Momo asks Kim "[w]hy do you hate us so much?" Kim replies, "[b]ecause we're not like everyone else in that fucking school. I wish I was one of the boys. No one calls them ugly cunts." Momo then tells that she does not want to be like them – like the bullying boys. Here Kim ties her self-hatred to her difference as a girl and hence to her gender as performative even though as the movie progress, gender becomes more and more synonymous with the body and bodily limitations of being a girl.

Before a (mixed sex) gym class, the girls form a circle and hold each other's hands almost ritualistically to practice their own magic. Bella says "[n]o one will yell us or grab us. They'll leave us alone. Believe it." The girls close their eyes holding each other in a circle and the background noise disappears: the sounds of other students talking and laughing change into an ambient music. The music takes over everything else and magical-sounding bells work their way through. All the sudden the school bell rings again; it forces the girls to open their eyes, move away from each other and leave their own (sonic) world. The school bell then transforms to the same out of tune

transmission sound that played earlier in the school hallway and takes the listener-viewer to the gym class, almost as an omen, to see how the girls are bullied again.

Kim starts dissociating in the baseball field. Her mind wanders, she is not paying attention to the game anymore even though everyone else is yelling her to catch the ball. The sounds become muffled like they would come from a distance, or that there would be a room with a closed door between Kim and what happens around her. The yelling that has now targeted Bella (boys are calling her boobless), catches Kim's attention, brings the sound and then Kim back to the moment and its cacophony of yelling. The boys attack Bella after the class. They rip off her shirt and the dissociating music starts again. Kim and Momo comes for rescue. They comfort crying Bella and after the event, *Girls Lost* starts to take a different turn. These distancing sounds not only remove the girls from their environment, but it is impossible to ignore or unhear how these sounds accentuate the girls' bodies as limitations and in some ways traps through this removal from the environment.

When Ahmed states that bodies are shaped by contact with objects and with others that are near enough to be reached, the listener-viewer is confronted with the question what is left for the girls to reach – other than each other? The auditory space between the girls and their peers reflects the void that they cannot really articulate, yet that void is present as an unspoken, but not unheard, affect. Because the bullying is associated with being a girl, Kim finds it as a valid reason to reject her life as a girl before she can articulate the more complex and nuanced undertones of the suffocating feeling of being someone else and in a wrong body. What is near enough for her to reach to reshape her life is being a boy; to have the body of a boy that is not bullied. Again, the idea that girl body is a trap is present through Kim, Momo and Bella's lack of success in sports and their clumsiness in such physical activities. I keep thinking of also Schiefauer's original idea that in

puberty, the ideas of bodies as gendered with gender specific capacities become internalized and the result of socialization to such bodies visible and tangible. In a way, being a girl really is a trap because of such beliefs and puberty with all its changes means end of an era for the body that attracted less at least sexualized attention and caused less worries.

The sounds of distance are simultaneously sounds of solidarity between the girls and their care for each other. The flowing ambient music that hides the noise around the girls and the panicky sound of transmission become the containing space that defines and separates their lives as victims of bullying. While the distancing sounds are objects that draw the girls together, their physical touches are narrated as soothing ethereal sounds; hurting and healing, wandering and finding the way. In many ways, the listener-viewer feels the girls' touches and closeness as music, as a background noise that muffles and disappears to a distance, as a space of its own.

The haunting, ambient soundscape of the girls' lives speaks for the way the girls come into existence also through their longing for bodily space of agency that ends the silence they must retreat into for their safety. The bullying does not only objectify and sexualize their bodies, but it painfully shows how women's bodies are targets of sexual violence just through their existence. The disquieting element of the water in the movie resembles the safety as silence and the moment of Kim taking a bath is very descriptive. She yells underwater, the listener-viewer can hear only silence. She has no *sound*.

Yet, the sounds build distance also between the girls. Bella is not pleased with Kim's behavior in the boy-body and is unwilling to let Kim take advantage of the magical flower. After Kim demands Bella to let her drink the sap by threatening her with knife, Kim spends a night as transformed into a boy with Tony and the growing distance between the girls is tangible and audible. The very physical act of threatening Bella with a knife literally cuts Kim apart from rest of

the friend group: when she pulls out the pocket knife and opens the blade, a sharp and stinging sounds linger in the air. The sound resembles the beeping sound of transmission that disconnects girls from the world. Kim's agency is however driven by despair, unanswered questions of her gender identity and sexual desires, rejection of the passivity of the objectified girl body and expectations related to it.

Momo is also upset, but for different reasons than Bella: she is in love with Kim and feels rejected. After the incident in the greenhouse, Kim walks to the school yard on the following morning. Momo and Bella notices her from a distance, Kim stops, they look at each other for a brief moment before Momo and Bella walks away. The listener-viewer hears the sound of an airplane propagating through the air. It is somewhere far up in the sky, but the sound catches the attuned ear and the hollow and echoing sound of it flying away creates a feeling, a very spatial one, of the distance between the girls. Their friendship is being stretched and tested. The sound of distance is reinforced by the fact that their bodies do not come close and form a group when they enter the school building – the magical shield of their friendship is shattering.

It is also the rather binary understanding of gender and gendered bodies that builds up a tension and eventually distance between the girls. Momo is confused as she does not know if she wants Kim as a boy or a girl, or if Kim wants her as a boy or a girl. It seems that solving this gender puzzle is necessary for them to experience love. Momo also tells Kim that for her, there are better things for being a girl: "I want to be a girl, but you don't want to, or can't?" Momo's gender identity becomes confirmed through what it is not, that is, being a girl is not being a boy, and it takes Momo as subject toward what she is not: "To go 'off line' is to turn away from 'the other sex' is also to leave the straight line. And yet turning toward one's own sex is read as the act of threatening to put one's sex into question" (Ahmed 2006, 71). It feels like the distancing sounds

and sounds of growing distance resemble this heteronormativity and lack of options in the gender binary: that choosing from two options means that there is always something to lose, that choosing itself is a loss, and even when choosing what feels right –leaving the straight line – threatens existing order of the world and the friendship.

When Kim runs away at the end of the movie, Bella says “don’t do anything stupid, won’t you?” After all they have been through, it is hard to think Bella’s words as encouraging or empathetic. Ahmed discusses through her work that queer bodies exist together: “The queer body is not alone; queer does not reside in a body or an object, and is dependent on the mutuality of the support” (2006, 170). The lack of such bodies in Kim’s world and her inability to align herself in the world resonates with Ahmed’s words. Kim’s rejection of the soundlessness that the world offers her as a girl, the void and distance from things she would want to reach, aligns her away from the straight line and from her friendships.

Kim’s search for her gender identity and her magical transformations narrate her as also sonically different from Momo and Bella, yet what is heart-breaking is the loss of mutuality and closeness the girls shared as a result of this difference. In a way, the idea of Kim’s wrong body comes from Momo and Bella as they reject Kim’s questioning and experimenting with her gender. At the same time, Kim’s “wrong body” and how it is transmitted through the dissociating sounds is centralized as the cause of not belonging, or belonging to somewhere or something that is in a distance and not reachable.

In *Girls Lost*, sounds shape the bodies and transitions their transformations and changes. The thematic sounds narrate the changes the characters experience in and through their bodies, but these sounds of transformations, and which I discuss in the next section, are inherently also pointing towards the distances and proximities. The agency Kim’s gains through the

transformations pushes Momo and Bella into passivity and the film fails to avoid gender stereotypes in their friendship. Because the bodily sounds of transformations into a boy are only attached to Kim, it further reinforces her body as an active doer and allows her to leave the space of isolating distance and passivity while leaving Momo and Bella to that space. Yet, these stereotypes might be deployed to point out how difficult it is to escape the gendered existence and rising toward the world where the type of body one has defines the reality of its lived experience – including limitations and possibilities, feelings of safety, and what kind of relations and attachments one can build and have.

Sounds of Moments of Transformation

What objects do is what brings them forth in the shape they have. The wheel can roll, the desk hold a computer, the pen can write, the jug can pour... The capacity is not so much 'in' the tool, but depends on how the tool is taken up or 'put to use.' (Ahmed 2006, 46)

In *Girls Lost*, the magical flower is certainly a tool put into use and which capacity is tied to its use to fulfil desires – sexual, the desire to overcome the limitations of pubescent girl bodies, the desire to have agency instead of being objectified – that the girls feel they cannot fulfil in their bodies. Bella's greenhouse, a very literal place of growth and change, is a central location of the friendship. It houses the magical flower and is a safe haven for the girls as they spend lot of time together there: in isolation of the outside world, one could also say, and in an ecosystem of their own – though as Kim's desire to transform into a boy grows deeper, what kind of biodiversity the ecosystem can contain becomes an important question.

Bella inherited the greenhouse from her mother who used to organize tea parties there for the girls when she was still alive. It feels as if the time has stopped inside the greenhouse and it exists in some other time dimension; in some other time-and-space continuum where things were

easier and better. In a way, the green house with its glass walls that shut out the surrounding world is a reference to the “simplicity” before puberty: even the porcelain teacups the girls use refer to the childhood tea parties. In one of the windows is a framed text: “If you’re blind to what is different, this story is not for you. But if your eyes are open, you should listen carefully.” Under the text is a picture of butterfly.

Needless to say, the magical ceremony of drinking the sap also takes place in the greenhouse. While the girls are dancing in their masks and costumes outside, all the sudden the sound of tinkling bells and butterflies flying and calmly flapping their wings fill the room and invite the girls to the greenhouse. Kim says that “she” has attracted the butterflies and refers to the flower. Before each of the girls takes a sip of the sap, they raise a toast with their little tea cups and the sound of cups clinking is followed by an owl’s shriek. Storm hits immediately after the girls finish their drinks: the sounds of howling wind, wind chimes signing, and the slamming of windows opening and closing by the force of the wind are followed by a heavy rain against the glass ceiling of the greenhouse. The girls run through the rain back indoors rather cheerfully, but the music is dark and suspenseful: the theme music of the transformation that builds the anticipation of something to happen plays in the background.

The music continues when the girls stand in front of a mirror. Kim’s face and body start to transform, the music changes to the beeping sound of transmission and then stops when Kim turns to look at Momo and Bella who are now also boys. The moment is full of wonder about their changing bodies: confusion, but first and foremost excitement. In their transformed bodies as boys, Kim, Momo and Bella head running to the school yard where teenage boys play soccer, drink beer and smoke in the evenings. Instead of hiding in their own world, they are now in the center of such events. The beeping sound of transmission starts to play when Kim, Momo and Bella walk past the

schoolyard towards the soccer field but stops all the sudden when their entrance remains rather unnoticed: no one yells at them, no one bullies them, no one in fact approaches them despite that their entrance is noticed with curious glances. The uneventfulness of their arrival is unusual for the girls and marks something about their gender: Kim, Momo and Bella are accepted when they take part to the world as boys. And this is the moment when the sounds of the surrounding environment become crystal clear and sharp: nothing is muffled and distanced and the isolating ambient that narrates the girls' world is now gone.

The transformation brings forth not only new sounds, but bodily possibilities and safety the girls have not experienced before. Ahmed argues that "orientation of objects is shaped by what objects allow me to do. In this way an object is what an action is directed toward." (2006, 52). So, if these sounds direct toward transformation and objects that become in reach to the girls, what do the sounds allow both the characters and the listener-viewer to do and make of the world? The transformation from girls to boys is not only bodily in *Girls Lost*, but the girls' reactions to the change are also manifested in their bodily inhabitation of the world and in the ways which sounds carry these changes.

Girls Lost borrows its sounds of transformation from nature. The sound of storm and rain bring the change in the first magic session, but the transforming body itself is also sonically attached to nature. The symbolism of the butterflies is one way to look at the transformation and gender in *Girls Lost*. The dark-colored insects fly around the plant and I find it rather fascinating how the sound of butterfly wings, something we do not normally hear, is almost tangible. Butterflies go through four-staged metamorphosis (egg, larva, pupa, and adult) and are widely used as metaphors to depict the life cycles, changes, and transformations of human life. In

Girls Lost, the sound of butterfly wings becomes thematically repeated in the moments of magical transformation from a girl to a boy.

The sound of butterflies guide something more than just the physical transformation: the sound carries through different moments and narrate the complexity of the experiences that the transformation brings to especially Kim. However, the flying butterflies symbolize the last form of the four-staged metamorphosis which again directs the listener-viewer towards certain kind of binarism and even essentialism through the biological notions: even if Kim is now questioning her gender identity, there must be a definite answer, a definite form of gender she eventually embodies. The adult butterfly is a certain kind of body also: a body that through its transition from egg to adult takes a shape that for many people symbolizes beauty and perfection; the only “right” form of body in that life cycle.

It is not just the butterfly as a visual object that functions as a symbol, but the flapping sound of its wings every now and then out of rhythm while at other times in rhythm is captivating, inviting and guiding. The sound hints of the directions Kim is about to take or thinks of taking. The sound of butterflies surrounds Kim, Momo and Bella when they are smoking and drinking beer in the greenhouse: their bodily confidence and activities are now different after they have inhabited the world as boys. Smoking and drinking are first introduced as the boys’ activities in the small-town school yard but now, all the sudden, these habits are carried to the greenhouse and its magical safety drawn from childhood. Something has changed in Kim, Momo and Bella’s life cycles. The awakening of sexuality is also orchestrated through the sound of an adult form of butterfly: the girls lay on the greenhouse’s floor next to each other and when Kim holds Momo’s hand and caresses her, the sound of the butterfly wings composes the scene.

Similarly, the sound of an owl shrieking repeats multiple times in *Girls Lost*. Interesting

enough, the listener-viewer never actually sees one. While owl is often considered as a bird of wisdom, the nocturnal sounds of an owl, often described as shriek, hoot or screech, sounds mournful and owl has been described as a messenger of death, but the shriek can also symbolize an omen or a prophecy (Ferber, 2007). It seems that both the sound of butterfly wings and a shriek of an owl narrate the change, yet they both serve very different functions in that process. The butterflies are a welcomed sound of transformation: they feel safe and gentle. The owl in the background hints toward something clandestine and scary, creating ambiguity in what the change will bring. Yet, as a messenger of death it could certainly be a sonic reference to the multiple endings, both literal and metaphorical, losses and goodbyes in *Girls Lost*. If so, I find it in some ways reinforcing and co-opting the genre of teenage years being simply unhappy and full of torment; that change entails loss.

Another interesting aspect of Kim's bodily transformation is the fact that it begins already on the night when the seed of the magical flower is planted before she even drinks the sap. Is this a reference to the beginning of puberty and bodily but also psychological changes it brings, or a subtle suggestion of Kim's growing bodily discomfort – or both? The restless night Kim spends in her bed after the planting the flower brings forth the bodily sounds that are present in the movie as sounds of transformation. The scene portrays Kim panting in her sleep and the screen starts to fill with images of microscopic picture of (blood) cells. Then comes the sounds of those cells rushing in the bloodstream followed by a sound of heartbeats, then image and sound of the plant growing fast-forwarded. The repetition of these images and sounds, panting, cells rushing, plant growing, and heartbeats along with suspenseful music that intensifies together with the bodily sounds create a feeling of very bodily anticipation. Kim gasps and wakes up. These sounds are at the same time medical and scientific in their cellular level visual and sonic presentation, but also very intimate:

they bring Kim's body to the auditory space as something that touches the listener-viewer's perception and senses in a very personal level. The listener-viewer feels the body and bodily discomfort through Kim's restless sleep, but gets also a foretaste of the change in Kim's life and gender identity that is about to come. Yet, these sounds certainly focus Kim's body as a central aspect of her gender identity.

These sounds of nature invite to think Bettcher's articulation of the stronger version of the wrong body model and where gender identity determines one's "real sex" – that one is trapped in a wrong body because it does not match one's native identity. Also Judith Butler discusses the discursive nature of gender and sex: "Whether gender or sex is fixed or free is a function of discourse which...seeks to set certain limits to analysis or to safeguard certain tenets of humanism as presuppositional to any analysis of gender...These limits are always set within a limits of hegemonic cultural discourse predicted on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality" (1990, 9). Through her critique of discourse that draws its power from biological sciences, Butler states that against such discourse where "'being' of gender is an effect," sex in fact is not a cause but an effect (1990, 32). I want to touch Butler's utilization of Foucauldian discourse analysis in her theory of gender and sex because *Girls Lost* seems to both set certain limits to understand Kim's emerging transgender identity through its references to the nature (hence sex as a biological fact) and utilizes the idea of biological sex as "real sex."

Sounds are powerful and have power too; they do not exist in vacuum and without meanings. Foucault states that "[d]iscourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance" (1978, 101). We draw information from our

environment also through sounds, react to them, act based on them, and make conclusions based on such sounds that shape our understanding of the world and its order. Sounds, like discourse, discipline us and how we interpret the word around us. While Kim, Momo and Bella most certainly embody the performative aspects of gender through the affects they carry with them after each transformation, the nature imagery and sonic world of bodily sounds create an atmosphere that attaches gender to the body together with its connection to nature. Is this gender essentialism or is this magic? While all the girls transform into boys, only Kim's transformation is narrated through these biological and medical references which guide towards certain kind of essentialist ideas of gender.

Towards the end of the movie, Kim's desire to drink the sap and transform is depicted almost like an addiction. The bodily sounds are back but as more intensive; they are like withdrawal symptoms. She is shivering, breathing heavily and her heart is bouncing. Kim is asleep, yet the listener-viewer can hear her crying and the faint sound of butterflies fills Kim's room. When she wakes up, she immediately walks to the greenhouse where she threatens Bella with knife. Her bodily anguish is loud; something needs to be done, something needs to be changed, something needs to transform. The events of the movie take place late summer–early fall. By the end of the movie, Momo sets the greenhouse on fire and it burns completely. Bella saves the roots of the flower from the ruins. Relating this to slash-and-burn agriculture where burning old crop and vegetation provides nutrient rich ash to the soil for a new crop to grow, I find similar symbolism in burning of the greenhouse and in the end of childhood and new kind of growth it entails. When Kim in the end of the movie runs away, something about her and in her is transformed. Silently crying, she looks at the roots of the magical plant Bella gave her at the backseat of the car she stole

and after zooming to the roots, the camera rises above the horizon and reveals a forest of full-grown trees at the beginning of fall foliage.

The transition from roots to full-grown trees, from summer to fall, is a transformation of its own. The fall symbolizes end of an era, dying of something that can be reborn in the spring. Luckily Kim has the roots with her from where to grow – one of the few moments in the film that articulates hope. Keining says in another interview that what drew her to the story was “[t]he state of gender fluidity, among other interesting issues that the story deals with. I wanted to examine the limits of self and the body. In the portrayal of the main character Kim, I [explore how] identity and gender [are in] perpetual motion — constantly changing and negotiable” (Berger 2015). Maybe the end of the film, read with the sense of hope, then also resembles Kim letting go of her body as a limit in her search of who she really is.

The nature also functions as a magical setting. I was left to think of Nordic Folklore as a possible source of inspiration for the setting, but Schiefauer, the author of the book from which *Girls Lost* seems also to draw from setting-wise, says that besides romantic and magical qualities of the nature, “the settings and times were chosen for practical reasons. If teenagers are supposed to be able to do the things that Kim, Bella, Momo, and Tony do in the book, it has to take place at night, when the parents are sleeping, and in places that are empty at night, like abandoned shelters and remote industrial area” (Vogel 2014). And as I briefly discussed earlier, this kind of setting, a small harbor town surrounded by forest is a rather typical setting in Nordic countries; in a way, such a realistic take on the environment even enhances the magical realism element of the film.

Sounds of Mask

Disorientation can be a bodily feeling of losing one’s place, and an effect of the loss of a place: it can be a violent feeling, and feeling that is affected by violence, or shaped by

violence directed toward the body. Disorientation involves failed orientations: bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape, or use objects that do not extend their reach. (Ahmed 2006, 160)

Girls Lost brings *mask* to the listener-viewer as a relationship between the mask and the self. The magical mask of transformation allows the girls to explore the world differently and as different persons – in different bodies – but the magic is not the only thing that constitutes the complex entity of mask in *Girls Lost*. Kim tells Momo early in the movie that she feels like she has a zipper somewhere and there is a different body underneath, the “real me.” One is left to think that the body Kim inhabits is in fact the mask, something she wants to remove. Yet, as Bettcher articulates, the idea that one has an innate gender identity is quite problematic as woman and man are social categories that emerge from how they are socially and culturally constructed – and “given that the social category ‘woman’ has served to oppress human female persons, we quickly see why a view positing a native gender identity is going to be problematic insofar as it naturalizes sexist cultural phenomena” (2014, 388).

Yet, many trans* individuals identify as men and women and many do not; some have gone through genital reconstruction, some have not; some have surgically altered their bodies, some have not; some take hormones, some do not. As Bettcher points out through these facts, body do not always validate one’s gender identity and body as a central requirement for public validation, identification and acceptance should not be used as it assumes that there is some norm for how woman and man look as bodies cross-culturally (2014, 388-389). I try to think what the mask means also through these terms, especially how the bullying and objectification of pubescent girls’ bodies situate Kim, Momo and Bella to the narrow bodily space where they all feel uncomfortable in different ways – Kim more than the else.

While I discuss masculinity under the theme of mask, I do not intend to say that masculinity

is a mask per se, but rather that the movie shows the ways which masculinity hides certain things: friendship, closeness, intimacy, and insecurities. Similarly, and at the same time, the girls' transformations into boys show how gender itself can be a protective mask (because of these hiding qualities). Kim complains to the gym teacher about the bullying and the teacher's response summarizes both the narrowness of masculinity, but also the value, or lack of it, being a girl: the teacher tells Kim to toughen up. If the boys are tough, she must be too. The boys' mockery of the girls' bodies and calling them with degrading names painfully shows how the girls and their bodily integrity is ignored and left unprotected.

As Ahmed discusses the meaning of background, there is always something behind a mask too; a face, a background information. Michael Taussig's public secret means a secret that the members of the society want to keep unchallenged; it is as a secret everyone knows but does not want to admit they know or discuss. The gym teacher in a way exemplifies this with her attitude towards the girls: girls are weak, boys are strong. Public secrets create subjects as they act based on what not to know: "Knowing what not to know lies at the heart of a vast range of social powers" (1999, 5). Taussig cites Walter Benjamin and through his words states that "[t]ruth is not a matter of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it" (1999, 2). Ripping off the mask is a liberation, a revelation of this secret, and disruption of the system that silently allows oppression as a public secret. The magical transformation into boys is a moment of revelation to Kim, Momo and Bella. Their lives change from rejection to acceptance when they are transformed into boys, but they also encounter new kind of peer pressure to perform their masculinity right.

Kim, Momo and Bella are at the same time highly visible and invisible as teenage girls

often are; they are left unnoticed but are also noticed and ridiculed for being different. For the boys in their school, Kim, Momo and Bella are lesbians, cunts, and whores. It is Kim's behavior the gym teacher is expecting to change, not the boys; it is publicly known –even when not discussed – that her life and feelings as a teenage girl are less important. When Momo prepares black-and-white masks for the girls before their first transformation, the movie takes its first steps toward the theme of mask. She skilfully prepares the masks while tears are trickling down her cheeks and the listener-viewer can hear her sniffing quietly. The ceremony of wearing the masks is however a joyful event. For Taussig “mask” is not a disguise but a form of transformative power and when the girls wear masks and cloaks and hold torches while they dance around a tree in circle, they are certainly freeing themselves. Fever Ray's “Now is the Only Time I Know” plays on the background and it really feels that under those masks, the girls do not need to carry their histories, worries, and public secrets: they are getting ready to utilize the collective and transformative power of the transformation.

Yet, they soon find out that being a boy needs bravery, too. The relationship between Tony and Kim scratches the surface of masculinity and what might be found behind that mask. Ahmed offers a way to approach this new horizon of the girls':

We might think that we reach for whatever comes into view. And yet, what 'comes into' view, or what is in our horizon, is not matter a simply of what we find here or there, or even where we find ourselves as we move here or there. What is reachable is determined precisely by orientations that we have already taken...The surfaces of the bodies are shaped by what is reachable. (2006, 55)

While Ahmed discusses about things that come into view, I am not only looking at, but listening to what becomes hearable. The mask might hide the faces and bodies, but the sounds give away something behind the masks. The first time Kim, Momo and Bella transform into boys, the sounds of the environment come close and the listener-viewer is encountered with a new kind of

soundscape. The sounds are vivid and fully attached to the present moment. Once Kim, Momo and Bella have overcome the surprise that they can, in fact, participate in the sports and other activities with boys and without being bullied, they too start producing the new kind of soundscape. When they play soccer, they too cheer.

During the soccer game, the sound of transmission is reaching, but then ends before it actually starts. The disruptive and dissociating sound cuts off before it reaches its high pitch frequency and sounds of the game replace it. Kim makes a goal and is now being cheered at: his presence is loud when he runs hands in the air celebrating the goal. This was the moment and scene for me when I immediately thought about Iris Marion Young's famous exploration of how women grow up to take less space through. Young claims that women do not perceive themselves as capable doing tasks that require physical strength and "fail to summon the full possibilities of our muscular coordination, position, poise, and bearing" (1980, 142).

The insecurity of women encloses a double hesitation of lack of confidence in ability and fear of getting hurt. Young argues that "in feminine existence, however, the projection of an enclosed space severs the continuity between a 'here' and a 'yonder'" (1980, 150). The distinction between these places is not based on women's actual bodily possibilities, but in their understanding or experiences that a woman is where she is – here – and cannot be there. The space of yonder is a space a woman is looking into but cannot move into. It is not the soccer game as physical activity that removes Kim, Momo and Bella from such space, but the new kinds of sounds attached to them situate the girls in space where their bodies are valued and cheered for.

For Kim, Momo and Bella, the transformation allows them to sneak out of the place of yonder. They are hesitant and cautious at first, but when they realize that they are welcome to join the game, their bodily comportment follows. The magical masks they wear on that night transforms

into a newly found confidence also in their girl bodies. Kim finds a new kind of strength in sports, both in climbing and baseball, and her confidence is welcomed with encouraging yelling and cheering: the sounds of the soccer game repeat now in the gym class where the girls have been only mocked and bullied before. Bodies acquire orientation through repetition of actions, as “actions that have certain ‘objects’ in view, whether they are physical objects required to do the work...or the ideal objects that one identifies with” (Ahmed 2006, 58). Kim does not reach toward her gender identity only through the magic, but through the repetition of certain acts, through certain sounds. Kim abandons the shelter the greenhouse has offered and eventually the company of Momo and Bella to spend time with Tony which is a repetition of its own kind. The relationship with Tony takes Kim to spaces and situations she has not experienced as a girl, but leaving the safety of childhood in the abandoned greenhouse, Kim’s friendships and intimacy with Tony brings also another kind of change.

Kim finds himself being attracted to Tony and the feeling is mutual. Kim’s sexuality becomes a new dimension in the negotiation between the self and the mask. Yet, Tony is not just an object of attraction, but an object of identification. When Momo, who is now clearly in love with Kim and jealous of her, asks if Kim wants to be like Tony or be with Tony, and Kim tells that Tony is also trying to be something he is not and which is the reason she escapes to his company. With this Kim refers to Tony being in a closet with his sexuality, or not even in a closet, but denying it. The mask has its own spatiality in these layers of truth and public secret: Kim and Tony come together, because their bodies somehow fit into the world in similar manner. They both know that they are attracted to each other, but like a proper public secret about masculinity, they practice “don’t ask, don’t tell” philosophy to stay safe.

The sounds of bodily activities and agency walk hand in hand with the mask in *Girls Lost*.

The magic as mask also allows certain kind of recklessness for Kim: because s/he still is a girl outside the magic (hence, looks like a completely different person), the fear of getting caught is almost non-existent. Kim helps Tony with a robbery and starts spending time in a cave in a remote area where other teenage boys and girls from the town drink and smoke. When Tony teaches Kim to drive a car and encourages Kim to drive faster, the responsible Kim protecting and caring for her friends is somewhere else: the car tires screech when he speeds and the sound of heartbeats and suspenseful theme music flows throughout the scene. When he eventually hits the break and sounds are silenced, Kim laughs. Through the body that is acknowledged, accepted and appreciated as boy, Kim learns about freedoms and double standards of the gender binary.

As a thank you for being a partner in crime and helping him in a burglary, Tony gives Kim a stolen Zippo lighter. The clank the lighter makes when its lid is opened, the sound of sparks and light, is repeated almost as a melody when Kim plays with it. The sound of lighting a cigarette repeats as a characteristic of Kim when he spends time in the cave. Not only is the Zippo symbolic of Kim's and Tony's relationship that sparks but soon becomes suffocated, but the sound of fire in general, such as crackling sound of camp fire in the cave, is associated with being a boy in the film. Through their mischiefs, drinking and smoking, and sexual desire towards each other in a homophobic environment, Kim and Tony are playing with fire both figuratively and literally. Even when the fire is not visible in a scene, the listener-viewer can hear it somewhere in the background. The sound signals that something is burning, yet the unfixed nature of the sound allows to play with ambiguity and the metaphorical meaning of it and what exactly is the cause and source of the burning.

Tony lives through and behind of what could be called as mask. Before he teaches Kim to

drive a car, he pulls out a gun and tells Kim that “[i]f you want to kill yourself, you don’t shoot yourself in the temple. It’s better to shoot yourself in the mouth.” Tony puts the gun in his mouth and starts breathing heavily. His breathing intensifies like he would be in panic, running away from something, and then he triggers the gun: clicking sound of the unloaded gun echoes in the air for a moment. What is under Tony’s mask is not the tough masculine guy he performs to be, but a boy trying to escape the feelings of disorientation, loneliness, rejection, and not belonging – the same feelings Kim tackles in her life too.

Kim and Tony go swimming together and when they dive, they caress and hold each other under the water. The muffled sound of current of bubbles around the boys wrap their bodies with slow moving and ethereal ambient music. The water literally washes away the sounds of everything else and strips away the need to be the boys to the rest of the world. Under water there are no secrets. Kim and Tony get out of the water to lay down on the rock. Kim caresses Tony who takes deep breaths and all the sudden the sound of his breathing changes to silent crying (even though his eyes remain closed and smile on his face).

Sound of waves touching the rocks slowly is interrupted when Tony’s friend is calling him. The transient moment of closeness and intimacy between Kim and Tony is gone. Following Ahmed’s footsteps, the space does not extend to the shape of Kim and Tony’s relationship and bodily intimacy, yet the beautifully sounded moment is an ephemeral glimpse into such possibility. It is also a sound of vulnerability normally absent in the boys’ world. Kim heads back home and finds Momo waiting for him in his bed. They kiss and Momo wants to know that Kim wants her as a girl and not as a boy, but Kim stays quiet and moves to sit next to the window. The listener-viewer cannot see Kim’s face, and not much of him to begin with, but the sound of Kim playing with the Zippo replaces any words he could possibly utter.

Both the orienting and disorienting sound of fire and the dissociating sound of water speak for the gendered worlds the movie depicts and sounds out. Ahmed states that “[b]odies become straight by tending toward straight objects, such that they acquire ‘direction’ and even their tendencies as an effect of this ‘tending forward’” (2006, 86). The narrow options for choosing differently are embedded in the soundscapes of *Girls Lost*. Choosing one direction, orienting towards certain thing, is always a loss of some other thing. In a way, the soundscape reinforces this binarism in both effective and affective manner. The closeness and intimacy Kim and Tony experience in their sonically enveloped diving is forever gone and finding their own shapes, their identities, proves to be hard for both Kim and Tony.

Tony keeps his pet bird Olga in a cage at the rooftop of his building. The bird is loud and needs to be kept outdoors so that it is not just out of sight, but out of being heard as his mother and her boyfriend have requested. The listener-viewer is provided with a sonic symbol and reference to Tony’s homosexuality and it is intriguing how it is the sound of the bird that refers to his sexual orientation: it is easier to close your eyes than ears. Tony gives vodka to Olga to impress Kim only to later find the bird dead. The singing has stopped and the bird is silenced, but in the background the wind moves the metallic parts of the cage and the creates a rhythm of something abandoned, like a park or building where only natural forces create haunting sounds and move things around when the human touch is gone. When Tony later attacks Kim and brutally beats him for his “disgusting” sexual desire, it feels that something Tony has tried to keep alive inside him is now silenced and dead too.

Kim and Tony’s worlds depart in another violent event towards the end of the movie. Kim heads to the cave where Tony is hanging out with a girl and eventually tries to sexually assault her. Kim attacks Tony to stop him but ends up brutally beating him up. The camera focuses on Kim’s

face, but the listener-viewer cannot avoid hearing the violence and Kim pitilessly kicking Tony's body: the loud thumps that echo in the dismal cave forces the listener-viewer to feel the beating. Suddenly something breaks in Tony's body, but it is obvious that something breaks, or have already been broken, in Kim too. Kim is not in this situation as a boy he thought he would be: the traumatic memories of bullying and harassment he has experienced with Momo and Bella are relived in his acts of violence. Momo has drunk the sap to appear in the cave as a boy and stops Kim's violent beating. Dark music that sounds like Tibetan monks chanting starts playing when Kim walks away; nothing else can be heard. Momo runs after Kim but cannot reach him. An owl shrieks.

Kim is in pain and her stomach hurts. She collapses on the ground and realizes that she got (what seems like) her first period. Kim is in agony: she cries and keeps saying no. Her body is transforming to something she does not want to. While the period is certainly a reference to a puberty and end of an era in Kim's life, she seems to be in agony for another reason: period marks the onset of becoming a woman. Again, such biological and bodily reference of gender is related with Kim's distress and gender identity.

Momo is upset, hurt and feels betrayed. The beeping sound of transmission plays when Momo throws gasoline all over the greenhouse and the transmission sound ends to Momo lighting a match. An owl shrieks again and Momo sets the greenhouse on fire. The crackling sound of flames are silenced with ambient music: it is cathartic, ethereal, slow, it paints the scene, and when the listener-viewer sees the mask Momo made in the beginning of the movie burning, it is hard not to think that also the mask Kim has been wearing is removed and burned. I read ambiguity in this reference: as I discussed in the section of sounds of transformation, the fire that destroys can also signify rebirth, a beginning of something new. Yet, it can also symbol how difficult it is to escape

the gender roles and expectations, to go off line without being hurt, and attempts to do so are punished one way or another. Bella's screams break the ethereal music and brings the sound of flames, the reality of the moment, to the present. Momo and Kim looks at each other from distance, crying, and it is obvious that the distance is not only physical. Something has changed. The magic disappears.

Chapter Conclusion

By bringing forth the sounds, I have brought in front what the sounds do through their affective capacity: they create a space of isolation, disconnectedness that can be felt, the void of the world the body rises toward and tries to align with in *Girls Lost*. It is not just the visual objects that make the world of *Girls Lost*, but the echoing ambient sound of the world the girls live in reaches the listener-viewer a story beyond its physical location. The events in *Girls Lost* take place in a small town in a very narrow spatial area, yet the sonic narratives depict a much bigger world of the characters where something dies, where something breaks inside them, where distance grows, and where they feel love and loss.

The film has two clear storylines: The girls are facing the tough reality of puberty and their changing bodies becoming objects of the gaze mockery and evaluations. They retreat to their own world characterized by isolating ambient sounds that bring their bodies together in safety. Yet, Kim and Momo are also awakening to the sexual desire they feel for each other which is beautifully and intimately sounded out through the ethereal music present when their bodies are close. The transformations into boys unsettle the friendships. Bella is disappointed in Kim's reckless behavior, which portrays the rigidity of gender roles also in their friendship. Momo and Bella are left in passivity when Kim finds his confidence and identity as a boy. It is hard to say why exactly Momo and Bella abandon their friend who is clearly in distress: is it because Kim finally

comes to terms with his gender identity and Momo and Bella condemn this? Are they confused and feel betrayed? Whatever the reason is, from such (queer) loss emerges Kim's certainty of her gender identity.

The friendship with Momo and Bella is not the only loss Kim experiences. The intimacy he shares with Tony when transformed into a boy and freedom he gets to taste is broken violently by Tony and it leaves Kim hurt and alone. Tony's rejection of his sexual desires manifests as hatred toward Kim and who he really is. As Ahmed states, queer bodies depend on each and exist through the shared contact: "Queer becomes a matter of how things appear, how they gather, how they perform, to create the edges of spaces and worlds" (2006, 167). The lack of such bodies in *Girls Lost* is tangible per se, but Tony as "a play with fire" further distances Kim's queerness and gender identity from everything around him and this plays in the haunting sounds of Tony's bird dying.

If Keining takes an essentialist perspective on gender through Kim's transformation and biological references of it, she definitely fares better in articulating the objectification and oppression of the girls and their bodies. Keining challenges gender roles as innate especially in my analysis of gender as mask, but the biological notions of sex and gender and Kim's trans* body as wrong body remain unquestioned and unchallenged ideas. In *Girls Lost*, Kim has a different body under the imaginary or invisible zipper and somewhere under is the "real me." It is difficult to not align *Girls Lost* with the wrong body model when Kim's distress and discomfort of her gender is expressed first and foremost as bodily and the transformation from a girl to boy narrated through the medical and biological sounds drawing from nature.

Girls Lost brought to my mind Alok Vaid-Menon, a wonderful gender non-conforming and trans-feminine writer and performance artist, and their words about the wrong body: "I wasn't born in the wrong body. I was born in the wrong world...The world I'm fighting

for is when we stop making assumptions around everything, when we allow people to self-narrate their bodies... Why do we always put the onus on people to change their body, and to prove or authenticate themselves to other people versus have society shift their norms?" (Marini 2015). *Girls Lost* represents a normative and suffocating society without any hint of an alternative to it and the sonic world transmits such isolation and loneliness in a moving manner.

In *Girls Lost*, the echoing sounds create the depth of the world the girls inhabit in a way images cannot. Because the film is an intersubjectively-constituted audiovisual experience, the soundscapes of the movie become places where the listener-viewer also dwells with the characters. At the same time, the sounds bring forth what is behind, what is under the mask, what cannot be spoken, and what cannot be perceived yet can be heard. The sonic narratives move worlds and lives in the film even when the characters are still, when they sleep, when they cry, and when they hold each other. While *Girls Lost* seem to be thematically, sonically, and story-wise stuck on the gender binary, gender essentialism, and the idea of wrong body, the widening horizon in the end of the movie could also suggest that there is another type of understanding of gender identity emerging and Fever Ray's "Keep the Streets Empty for Me" plays on the background: "Following the stream up North/ Where do people like us float.../ Morning, keep the streets empty for me."

CHAPTER IV

You Cannot Silence the Noise: Sounds of Transgender Identities in *Tangerine*

Introduction to *Tangerine*

If *Girls Lost* envelopes the listener-viewer with softly flying butterflies and ethereal ambient music, *Tangerine* caters a soundscape of the city that moves fast and moves the bodies of its characters. *Tangerine* came out in 2015 and because the movie was filmed with iPhone 5S phones, it photographically captures the deteriorating neighborhood decorated with graffiti and the central location of the story at the intersection of Santa Monica Boulevard and Highland Avenue – an area well-known for drugs and prostitution. Such technology gives *Tangerine* its unique hyperreal style that emphasizes the orange color of Los Angeles sunsets (Etheart 2015). Besides the beautiful sunset scenes, *Tangerine* is a story of a very particular kind of Christmas Eve of its three main characters: Alexandra, Sin-Dee Rella, and Razmik.

Alexandra and Sin-Dee are both Black transgender women and sex workers in Los Angeles, and the events take place on the block which carries a particular significance as a place and territory with its own rules and politics. The block is a name the transgender sex workers have given to the area designated only for them: there are no cis-gender sex workers on the block and many of the transgender workers are women of color. Razmik is an Armenian immigrant who drives taxi as his job to support his family, but he is also a regular client and well-known character on the block

Sin-Dee has been arrested for 28 days for saving her boyfriend and pimp Chester by hiding his drugs. Alexandra and Sin-Dee meets at the Donut Shop, another central place of *Tangerine*, and their happy reunion takes a dramatic turn when Alexandra blurts out that Chester

has been cheating on Sin-Dee with another a sex worker Dinah who is both white and a “fish” – a rather derogatory name for a woman who is not transgender. Sin-Dee is both furious and hurt after hearing the news and her mission to find Dinah sets in motion a whole series of unfortunate events that culminate into a dramatic confrontation at the Donut Shop by the end of the day.

The movie came into being as a collaboration between the director Sean Baker and the two starring transgender actresses, Mya Taylor, who plays Alexandra, and Kiki Kitana Rodriguez, seen and especially heard as Sin-Dee. Baker had recently moved to Los Angeles from New York and the idea for *Tangerine* came from the West Hollywood location, as the block was only half a mile from Baker’s new home (Murphy 2015). Baker did not have a clear idea for the script, but he was convinced that the unofficial red-light district would have a story to be told (Murphy 2015).

Tangerine is a micro-budget film and “caused a major stir” at the Sundance film festival in 2015 “following the reveal that the gorgeous-looking film was shot on iPhone 5s, something the filmmaker had managed to keep a secret up until its world premiere” (Smith 2015). Yet, “*Tangerine* is also vital for another, arguably more important, reason: it represents a major leap for transgender people on film” (Smith 2015).

When *Tangerine* was sold by Sundance festival, the official synopsis gave a rather interesting description of the film:

It’s Christmas Eve in Tinseltown and Sin-Dee is back on the block. Upon hearing that her pimp boyfriend hasn’t been faithful during the 28 days she was locked up, the working girl and her best friend, Alexandra, embark on a mission to get to the bottom of the scandalous rumor. Their rip-roaring odyssey leads them through various subcultures of Los Angeles, including an Armenian family dealing with their own repercussions of infidelity. (Smith 2015)

As Nigel Smith aptly adds, “[a]ll fine, except for the fact that Sundance failed to mention that both Sin-Dee and Alexandra are trans individuals, and that the main ‘subculture’ the film explores is a trans street culture rarely seen on film” (2015).

Baker wanted the story to be a real and honest portrayal of the area. Baker and Chris Bergoch, Baker's co-writer, started their project from the Donut Time (Etheart 2015). The project became to have a somewhat anthropological approach as Baker spent eight months "with his team to get to know the area and its people. He eventually came across aspiring trans actor Mya Taylor" who introduced Kiki Rodriguez to Baker. Baker met Taylor at the LGBTQ center on McCadden, changed contacts with her and recorded their interviews. Baker tells that after few meetings

Mya said, "I wanna introduce you to somebody," and she brought Kitana Kiki to the meeting, and she was a firecracker, and she had a lot to say about the world as well. But what I saw was that there were these two very drastically different personalities, but they were two personalities that clicked together. I was like, "This is an on-screen duo." I saw it right in front of me, at the local Jack-in-the-Box. So then we started. Right from there, I said to them, "I have this idea of two people coming together one day at Donut Time and around this area. And that's all I have. It's really nothing, it's in its infancy. It's this idea of maybe a love story, maybe it's a revenge story—we don't know yet, but it's about two people coming together. (Etheart 2015)

After few weeks of the team thinking the story together, Rodriguez told Baker that "'[w]ell, there is this one story that I can tell you,' and she basically told me what became the plotline of the movie: this woman scorned and this confrontation" (Etheart 2015). Rodriguez story marked also one of the key elements of the film. Baker tells how he immediately thought "'that's drama. That *is* drama.' That puts our characters on a journey, and it'll allow time for us to get to know them" (Etheart 2015). Taylor and Rodriguez assisted also with the language: the script was written in vernacular specific to Sin-Dee and Alexandra's world and Baker gave only few lines to the actresses to either accept, fix the language, or "throw it out of the window" (Etheart 2015).

Baker was faced with questions of accountability with his film. Because Taylor and Rodriguez are friends with the transgender women who work in the area, Rodriguez requested from Baker that the film should "show the harsh reality of what goes on out here" (Smith 2015). Rodriguez said that "[t]hese women are here because they have to be, and I want you make it

hilarious and entertaining for us and the women who are actually working the corner” (Smith 2015). Baker told that “his approach would have been more downbeat and dramatic had Rodriguez not put her foot down. Looking back, he said he realized how right she was. ‘She was asking for something that would present these characters to mainstream audiences in a pop culture way, so that they could identify with them. That’s how we reach the mainstream’” (Smith 2015).

Despite Baker’s fantastic work and magic with iPhones, Taylor and Rodriguez are the undeniable stars of *Tangerine*. Both of the actresses bring their personalities into the story in addition to their own life stories. Taylor and Rodriguez’s teamwork speak for their unique relationship. As Ashley Hill states in *The New York Times*, “[i]n wilder moments, the two are a madcap comic duo. In calmer scenes, they share a quiet intimacy. Throughout, they carry the burden of representation lightly and slough off stereotypes with spontaneity” (2015).

Both Taylor and Rodriguez’s personal histories are reflected in their acting: “‘Mya is all class and sass, and I’m crass,’ said Ms. Rodriguez, who added that Sin-Dee was born of frustration. ‘I’m so used to having miserable things happen in life,’ she said, noting that she had fought through homelessness. ‘I’m at the point that I’m going to make fun of everything, including myself, just to make myself or someone laugh or smile’” (Hill 2015). Similarly, Taylor’s calmness as Alexandra stems from her personal life situation. In the *NYT* interview “Taylor said that Alexandra is often quiet because the film was shot ‘at a tough time’ for her, when she was struggling to find work and beginning her transition. ‘I had just started taking hormones,’ she said. ‘It was so rough. I was so insecure’” (Hill 2015). I feel confident to say that *Tangerine*’s many layers build on the dynamics between Taylor and Rodriguez and their willingness to share their own stories and vulnerabilities in the process.

Through its main characters, *Tangerine* physically situates race in intersection with gender

and to a very particular area in Los Angeles. One way to approach the analysis of such space is through the lens of queer phenomenology, specifically, through Ahmed's (re)articulation of the Orient. What Ahmed offers through the Orient is an examination of race where she challenges Merleau-Ponty's optimism of "I can" of the habitual body; that the body rises toward the world with enthusiasm and anticipation. Ahmed draws from Franz Fanon's work by stating that "[r]acism ensures that the black gaze returns to the black body, which is not a loving return but rather follows the line of the hostile white gaze. The disorientation affected by racism diminishes capacities of action" (2006, 111). Orientalism was first theorized by Edward Said who explained that the East is a knowledge produced by the West based on the fictional, othering, and stereotyping ideas produced by the colonial power, which emphasize the difference: "Orientalism...is...a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment. Continued investment made Orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness" (2003, 6).

Ahmed continues this line of thought and argues that the Western consciousness has resulted a world where whiteness is reproduced through a repeated towardness (in similar manner as world built around compulsory heterosexuality is produced through the straight lines that create shared proximities, such as families that are heterosexual): "Orientalism involves a form of 'world facing'; that is, a way of gathering things around so they 'face' a certain direction...I want to suggest that orientalism also involves phenomenal space: it is a matter of how bodies inhabit spaces through shared orientations" (2006, 118). Through this suggestion Ahmed describes the Orient as affect: the racialization of bodies happens through the practice of creating distances as differences and therefore affects what one "'can do,' or even where one can go, which can be described in terms of what is and what is not within reach" (2006, 112).

Ahmed discusses how orienting “oneself by facing a direction is to participate in a longer history in which certain ‘directions’ are ‘given to’ certain places: they become the East, the West, and so on” (2006, 113). If the West situates the white heterosexual bodies closer – objects that are within the reach and therefore offering an orientation – the Orient then is built on the idea of distance and exclusion of bodies that are not white. The racial otherness is associated “with the ‘other side of the world.’ They come to *embody distance*. This embodiment of distance is what makes whiteness ‘proximate,’ as the ‘starting point’ for orientation. Whiteness becomes what is ‘here,’ a line from which the world unfolds, which also makes what is ‘there’ on ‘the other side’” (2006, 121).

So, what is in the Orient? Ahmed states that “[t]he Orient is not an empty place; it is full, and it is full of all that which is ‘not Europe’ or not Occidental, and which in its ‘not-ness’ seem to point to another way of being in the world – to a world of romance, sexuality, and sensuality...the Orient is sexualized, although how it is sexualized involves the contingency of ‘the who’ that encounters it” (2006, 114). In my analysis of *Tangerine*, I want to consider the block as a very particular kind of Orient. While sex work is criminalized, the listener-viewer soon realizes that the block is a space where rules are bent and the racialized sex workers form a community where everyone knows each other. Instead of “just” distance, the block portrays intimacies and closeness that emerge from the block being separated from the white, cis-gender and heterosexual West.

While Ahmed describes the Orient as a space that shapes and affects bodies through limitations, I see a certain kind of “I can” in the queer phenomenology of the block in *Tangerine*. I am not exactly writing against Ahmed’s theorization of the Orient; the Orient offers a fruitful way to examine the block through its racialized transgender sex workers as the sexualized and sexually desired East. Yet, the block is also a phenomenal space of (self-)

acceptance, a place of self-definition and agency that resist the whiteness of the West as desirable. Or; the “not-ness” of the Orient is not a limitation, but a motility both imaginatively and physically.

I am of course using the Orient/East and the Occident/West rather metaphorically here. The block is physically in the West, in West Hollywood as a matter of fact, but because the block is divided from the Occident by what constitutes the Orient in the Western consciousness – the women on the block are racialized, they do sex work, and they are neither cis-gender nor straight – the block comes to represent a world very different from its surroundings. Because of the embodied distances, the women are excluded from what gets passed on as the Occident, hence as white, straight, heterosexual, and middle-class. At the same time, the West produces knowledge of the transgender women on the block as sexualized through such distance to the Occident. They are fetishized as sex workers but rejected as transgender women of color from the mainstream strategies of survival, hence what constitutes respectable bodies, lives and families in the West. Yet, because the block comes to epitomize, materialize and physically locate such embodied distances and differences, I find the Orient/Occident dichotomy a useful way to examine the block and its inhabitants in *Tangerine*.

In my analysis of *Tangerine*, I want to particularly challenge Ahmed’s notions of the Orient as simply a production of the Occident, or that the inhabitants of the Orient reflect themselves on the Occident in restricting ways, and examine how the characters and their sonic narratives boldly take shapes of their own in a space that is a legal grey area. In the United States, trans* bodies are targeted through the intertwining legal and medical system multiple ways as objects of surveillance. The legal system understands bodies from the strictly binary view that a man is masculine, a woman is feminine, and there is nothing in between these two forms, and

therefore the legal system itself has to be understood as a particular institution that uses different types of tactics to govern the trans* bodies (see Spade 2009 and 2011).

Tangerine begins with Sin-Dee being released from jail and even after such experience she is back to business and says, “I’m fierce as fuck.” Her response and nonchalance of the correctional system speak volumes of the life on the block. While the legal system may make cosmetic adjustments to include trans* bodies as protected objects from some forms of violence, at the same time the system operates around the gender binary producing, reproducing and reinforcing two sexes as the norms, the legally recognized and legal sexes. Dean Spade states that these laws portrayed as formal equality expand the “state capacities for racialized gender surveillance” and co-opt those willing to adapt the heteronormative, heterosexual, gender-binary, white and middle-class standards of living, but any resistance concerning these norms will result as punishment and exclusion (2011, 8-10). By looking into the block and its sounds as the Orient in *Tangerine*, I hope to analyze how sense of self and one’s gender identity emerge also from the exclusion, and through the exclusion, as a rejection of the ideals of the West.

Let’s Make Some Noise: What is the Racialization of Noise?

Before my analysis, I want to say few words about noise as concept and what it means in my exploration of *Tangerine*. I want to particularly point out noise as racialized and social class-related concept and therefore always tied not only to the physical environment, but also to such contexts. Tripta Chandola examines noise in India’s Gowindpuri slums where “all sounds are articulated as *noise* (and thus a ‘nuisance’) in the middle-class narratives. On an everyday level this often resulted in slum-dwellers being silenced though limiting their sonic performances, for example, by restrictions on their use of loudspeakers during festivals and celebrations, imposed

with the help of local authorities” despite that the middle-class turned out to be noisier when the sounds of their everyday lives were explored (2013, 58).

In another article on the slums, Chandola offers a more precise articulation of noise and its class dimensions. Noise is “a generic categorisation of unfamiliar soundscapes that does not allow an interface to engage with, or control it, for a group or community... Noise is, at once, marginalised sound and sounds of power and resistance. Noise is not always, and singularly, about loudness, nor is it always about sound” (2012, 402). The discourse of the noisy other is a rhetoric that restricts the interaction between the social classes and constitutes sensorial hierarchies that identify the “other” (2012, 404). The middle-class builds distances by separating and differentiating itself from noise: the physical, the sensorial, but also moral distance (2012, 396).

When Chandola notes that the cheap labor of the slum-dwellers is desired but not so much their physical and sensorial presence, she could be describing the block from *Tangerine* and the loud final confrontation of the film and Razmik getting caught by his wife and mother-in-law for his regular visits on the block. The block is the Orient that is visited for sexual pleasure but not brought to the Occident and its heteronormative world order. By this I mean the sex work: the transgender women on the block are desired for their visual, physical and verbal loudness but their sonic presence and existence as transgender women is left and limited there – in the safe distance.

Similar remarks on the “noisy Other” are found in the history of the United States. Sensory historian Mark Smith’s research on slavery in the US through senses articulates how such histories are not just unfinished, but they have been sonically controlled by the dominant groups until today. Smith reminds that “racial categories had to be kept in line” through sensorial segregation (2006, 25). Without access to private and indoor spaces, the slaves spent lot of time outdoors and even the laughter of the slave was considered as a nuisance. I want to emphasize the

powerful argument that Smith makes in his book about the profound control the white slave holders and many white people of that time practiced. Because white senses had to, and still must, be protected from the Other, we have suffered a loss in history of sounds because of racial labelling certain kind of sounds as nuisances and noise. For me, *Tangerine* offers a complex, gendered, queer, and unapologetic resistance and response to such history of silence.

As I have brought up through the concept noise, race is not constructed only through gaze, but is marked also sonically and by creating a sonic distance. Jennifer Stoeber calls this the sonic color line:

The sonic color line is both a hermeneutics of race and a marker of its im/material presence. It enables listeners to construct and discern racial identities based on voices, sounds and particular soundscapes – the clang and rumble of urban life versus suburban “peace and quiet,” for instance – and, in turn, to mobilize racially coded batteries of sounds as discrimination by assigning them different cultural, social, and political value. The sonic color line produces, codes, and policies racial difference through the ear, enabling us to hear the race as well as see it. (2016, 11)

It is the sonic color line that “codifies sounds linked to racialized bodies – such as music and the ambient sounds of everyday living – as ‘noise,’ sound’s loud and unruly ‘Other’” (2016, 12).

Tangerine is not a quiet movie and through its sounds, it brings alive a story of marginalized community too often rendered invisible – inaudible – as valid and valuable representation of women of color and racialized sex workers. *Tangerine* goes against the sonic color line by refusing to be silenced and by making some noise.

The Sounds of Drama, High Heels and Noise

Collectives come to have ‘lines’ in the sense of being modes of following: to inhabit a collective might be to follow a line, as a line that is already given in advance. Lines also mark out boundaries, which clear spaces as well as delimit them by marking their edges. Such lines would establish who is and is not given collective: the spatial functioning of lines mark the edges of belonging, even when they allow bodies through. (Ahmed 2006, 119)

Tangerine portrays a collective that inhabits and shares a space: the block and the streets mark physical boundaries, but the shared lines are also constituted by race, gender and participation in the queer economics of sex work. *Tangerine* sounds out collectiveness, including its complexities and difficulties. These sounds direct and reference to adjustment of certain socio-economic circumstances and exclusion, but also finding friendships and connections that bring joy and hope to the block. Such friendship between Alexandra and Sin-Dee is built from the very first scene. The two friends meet at the Donut Shop after Sin-Dee is released from jail. Sin-Dee brings a donut to the table to share with Alexandra and wishes – or yells – loudly “Merry Christmas Eve, bitch!” and the two friends burst into a loud laughter. Despite the fact that Alexandra and Sin-Dee sit indoors, the sounds of the cars passing by pierces the windows and bring the sound of streets and traffic together with lively discussion and friendship already in the beginning of the film.

Sin-Dee quickly notices Alexandra’s bodily changes and brings this up in congratulating manner: “You finally got tits, bitch!” Alexandra replies, “[b]itch the estrogen has been kicking in and the only thing it has broken down was these fucking arms. Everything else in my body looks good... I’m trying to look like the real thing.” After saying this, the faint sound of cars passing by repeats in the short moment of silence between the two friends. Through such sonic reference, the body becomes attached to the streets before sex work is even discussed. As Taylor reveals, she had just started her transitioning when *Tangerine* was filmed and her role as Alexandra portrays the lived reality of such life phase. This update about Alexandra’s body, spoken casually and with a sense of warmth and humor over a donut, sets another directing and orienting line to how gender is discussed, experienced and felt in *Tangerine*. In this section, I focus on how being a trans* woman of color emerges from the friendships and the Orient as collective.

Tangerine explores how Alexandra and Sin-Dee unite as friends despite difficulties. The friends support each other's identities – even when it entails some mean word choices and gossiping on the block. In fact, *Tangerine* contextualizes what it means to be a transgender woman of color through the friendship between Alexandra and Sin-Dee: gender is not some isolated or biological entity of its own in the film but located in the intersection of the streets and especially friendships. The friendships and community are essential orienting lines of being transgender. Ahmed argues that “[t]o be oriented around something is not so much to take up the thing, as to be taken up by something, such that one might even become what it is that is ‘around.’ To be oriented around something means to make that thing central, or as being at the center of one's being or action” (2006, 116). The life on the block, including the relationships it encloses, is the central orienting spatiality in *Tangerine*. The block is introduced to the listener-viewer through what sounds like an endless line of cars passing, loud busses and bus rides – the traffic that metaphorically directs to think of the sounds as aligning lines of the Orient.

The sonic world of the friends is busy, but the noisy streets are not pushing the girls on the block away. Instead, the lively atmosphere of the block invites the inhabitants to participate. The travelling cars and busses might refer to the Orient as a destination far away, but at the same time these sounds bring the block close to the listener-viewer. Gaye Theresa Johnson's concept “spatial entitlement” offers an interesting way to examine the urban landscape and soundscape of *Tangerine*. Spatial entitlement describes “a way in which marginalized communities have created new collectivities based not just upon eviction and exclusion from physical places, but also on new and imaginative uses of technology, creativity, and spaces” and which allows the people of such communities to create “new articulations, new sensibilities, and new visions about the place of Black, Brown, and working-class people on the local and national landscape” (2013, x).

Johnson discusses how claiming spaces proposes an alternative model for constructing meaning and citizenship among those who are excluded from collective identities and create alternative expressions of collectivity: “Spatial entitlement provides a means for understanding how working-class communities and individuals secure or create social membership, even when the neighborhoods and meaningful spaces of congregation around them are destroyed” (2013, xi). I doubt that the loudness of the block’s traffic is desired, but how the collective of racialized transgender sex workers use the noisy streets as a space to negotiate what it means to be a woman in the world where womanhood is defined through being cis-gender directs the listener-viewer to think the very materiality of socio-political exclusion. The block as the distant Orient serves as an alternative space for those left out from the mainstream job markets, where the queer economics of sex work become an alternative form of collectivity.

Tangerine takes its crucial turn during the happy chitchat at the Donut Shop, after Alexandra accidentally reveals to Sin-Dee that Chester, Sin-Dee’s boyfriend, has been cheating on her while she has been arrested. Alexandra realizes that Sin-Dee did not know; a car honks outside almost as a warning sign; and when Sin-Dee hears that everybody has been talking about Chester’s new girl on the block, she is determined to know who the girl is. Alexandra says, “[g]irl, she’s some white fish. I don’t know.” Sin-Dee is both surprised and angry: “Chester is fucking cheating on me with real fish?” Alexandra confirms that it is true: “Yeah, bitch. Like a real fish girl, like vagina and everything.”

Sin-Dee is furious and for a reason. She has been away for 28 days because of taking the blame for Chester and he has been cheating on Sin-Dee with a cis-gender sex worker. While Sin-Dee is digesting the betrayal with anger, she is tapping – or should I say stabbing – the table at the Donut Shop with a powder brush (and which Alexandra glances at with a worried face). The

rhythm of the powder brush against the table is restless and the sound foreshadows the revenge tour that is about to begin. Alexandra says to Sin-Dee that “[a]ll men cheat... out here it’s all about our hustle and that’s it... what are you plotting?” Hip hop starts playing with banging beats and Sin-Dee storms off. Her heels are clicking against the pavement when she is off to the streets to claim her space.

I find the sound of heels in this scene particularly fascinating because it seals the very essence of Sin-Dee’s character in the beginning of the movie. High heels are meant to be loud but are sometimes considered also as noisy or too loud. Journalist Beca Grimm explores the attraction of sound of high heels and interviews Dr. Simon Moss, a psychology professor from Monash University who says that

[t]he sound of a loud pair of shoes can summon a range of associations for anyone within the clack zone. Depending on the speed and force of the wearer’s walk, these sounds can indicate nerves, authority, anger, hesitation...Whether intended or not, these shoes are sure to get the wearer attention...In general, the research implies that people wear loud shoes because they do want to be noticed...People who attract attention, in general, tend to be perceived as more sexually attractive. (Grimm 2016)

When the sound of the high heels is too loud, it can have the opposite effect on people. Grimm adds to the list that sound of high heels can be empowering, help to convey power, “a loud shoe can give off a warning akin to ‘fuck off’” (2016). Neither Alexandra nor Sin-Dee wear extremely high heels, yet the sounds of their heels are audible – loud and clear – refusing to apologize for the noise.

I would like to think of the sound of high heels not only speaking for Sin-Dee’s personal character, but also suggesting that the sound is territorial and spatial and therefore encloses authority over the block – the Orient. When the camera focusing on storming Sin-Dee transitions to the streets and Sin-Dee’s quest to find Dinah, the girls on the block wonder together “why would a real fish come to our territory?” Gender identities in *Tangerine* constitutes the spatial division and

distance of the block from rest of the city and the block with its heavy traffic orients the listener-viewer to understand the bodies of the women in relation to such spatiality: the transgender women are on the move and their identities emerge from these dynamic encounters and also conflicts on the block.

What *Tangerine* offers to the listener-viewer is quite far away from the idea of body-as-trapped-in-the-wrong-body model. While bodies as gendered are discussed in observant and keen manner, and both Alexandra and Sin-Dee bring their feelings about their bodies into the discussion, the film lacks the kind of bodily distress that would represent transgender bodies as inherently limiting and “wrong” for those whose bodies they are. Such representation is new and fresh and takes a step away from the kind of films that conflate transition with being transgender.

Alexandra and Sin-Dee’s bodies intersect also with another lived reality: they both are Black and their racialized bodies and gender identities set limitations what they can and cannot do. Ahmed states that “[t]he ‘matter’ of race is very much about embodied reality; seeing oneself or being seen as white or black or mixed does affect what one ‘can do’” (2006, 112). She emphasizes that what makes race a queer matter is what is affective about the “unreachable” (2006, 112). We do not only reach for what comes into view, but what is reachable is also about history of making certain things into reach: “a measure how the West has ‘directed’ its time, energy and resources” (Ahmed 2006, 117).

While *Tangerine* does not explicitly discuss sex work, the film makes it very clear that the women on the block are poor and what they can do is to employ their race and gender in sex work to survive. Neither of the friends have undergone gender affirmation surgery, or to be more precise, neither top nor bottom surgeries, and this is an asset on the block. While Alexandra and Sin-Dee’s bodies are not traps in a sense of gender identity, they do limit what Alexandra and Sin-Dee can

reach in order to survive. Yet, *Tangerine* does not focus on what the bodies cannot do or cannot reach the way Ahmed discusses the Orient in her work. *Tangerine* is not about the unreachable per se and, in fact, the film shows the characters largely ignoring what is outside the block. What the bodies *can do*, such as care for and support each other, becomes a form of spatial belonging to the community on the block to which the continuous humming of cars is reference to. At the same time, the sounds of motors and cars always passing but never stopping speak for the instability and lack of other possibilities for the inhabitants of the block. The transgender women are the attraction of the Orient, the sexualized “other,” yet the women are not pushed into passivity; they are the life of the block.

The Orient in *Tangerine* is not just a place of economic survival and it encloses a great deal of creativity, dreams and hopes. The streets are places of celebration and display of gender and its fluidity, performativity and playfulness. A good example of this is Alexandra’s singing performance at Mary’s, which she advertises to the girls on the block while she strolls the streets. When Alexandra steps on the stage, she portrays how being a transgender woman emerges from a moment of (sonic) performance which narrates the dreams Alexandra has for her musical talent. Despite Sin-Dee’s own quest for revenge, she arrives – late but determined – at Mary’s with Dinah. Alexandra’s singing is important not only for herself, but also for Sin-Dee who looks at Alexandra admiringly when she sings Doris Day’s “Toyland.”

The music fills the air and the club when Alexandra sings peacefully, beautifully and with a glamorous manner – a side of her she is not able to perform when she is at work. Alexandra’s performance and its slow pace, the softness of her voice, and the moment of Sin-Dee just sitting down in silence articulates the closeness of their friendship and the complexity of what it means to be a transgender woman on the block; it is not only about queer economics of sex work, but also

moments of queer artistry and hope. Dinah critiques Alexandra for sounding old, but her critique of the sound reveals a temporal, spatial and embodied distance. If Dinah in her own way resembles the ideals of the Occident – she is white, cis-gender and heterosexual after all – her critique embodies the historical distance. However, Alexandra shows absolutely no interest in Dinah’s contacts in the music business, that Dinah also sings, and what her musical genre is. In the block, she is far away from her own world and far from desired. For Alexandra, the music is not only an expression of her identity, but she sings as a part of the marginalized community with a history that has shaped her life to be what it is now.

Doris Day is well recognized as a gay icon and “Toyland” is a rather melancholic Christmas song: the singer longs to be in the “little girl and boy land,” back in the time of innocence, and never grow up. Alexandra is singing a sonic reference to the embodied history of limited choices left for a Black transgender woman when she grows up, but I argue that her song comes to symbolize much more the transgender community as a family on the block. When Baker was asked why he decided to set the story on Christmas Eve, he told that it was his co-writer Chris Bergoch’s idea. Bergoch wanted to set the story “on what supposed to be the most joyous night of the year” and “end up making it the least joyous night of the year” (Etheart 2015). Mya Taylor however added another layer by telling why she loved the fact that *Tangerine* is a Christmas story: “There are a lot of transgender people who suffer without their families for whatever reason. And I feel like the movie really shows that. ‘Cause neither one of those girls in the movie had families, they just each other, and at the end, they still just had each other, regardless of who’s cheating, or who’s fucking who” (Etheart 2015).

Christmas brings families together, but it also brings family tensions into the room. While

Alexandra's performance encloses a sadness of something she has lost, the peaceful song that brings Sin-Dee to audience is not entirely melancholic. As a contrast to the Alexandra and Sin-Dee's Christmas is Razmik's family dinner that ends to a fight with his mother-in-law and all the sudden the Christmas at Mary's seems quite wonderful. There is a certain kind of freedom in the sonic world of the friends and the block in general. Sounds flow and move like their lives and even the setbacks bring the two women momentarily down, they are not stuck in such moments. The sonic world invites to participate and not be trapped.

Finally, it is time for some serious drama! Sin-Dee's name is synonymous to drama and she is not afraid to take her unhappiness with Chester to the streets. When Sin-Dee runs out of the Donut Shop and starts asking about Chester's new girl, Alexandra yells to Sin-Dee: "I can't do this, it's too much drama...OK OK OK, I will go with under one condition. You must promise me there's not gonna be any drama. Because as soon as there's some drama, I'm out of there." Sin-Dee shouts with theatrically slow and mocking voice: "I promise no drama, Alexandra!" Again, their conversation is orchestrated with car noises accentuating the streets as a stage for both what is drama and not-drama. The friends walk away, but the sound of their heels remain and linger. Against everything Sin-Dee promised, by the end of the day two of the sex workers on the block says, "she's been out of jail for 24 hours and she is already causing drama."

One reason for this drama is in the act of hearing itself. When Alexandra tells Sin-Dee that she does not even know if the rumors are true, she says "[b]itch, I've been hearing shit in jail, I've been hearing shit out here. I don't know the fuck is real anymore." Drama is a lack of information; it is lack of the daily connections and being left out of what happens on the block. Drama is, in terms of Ahmed, a habit that shapes the block: the block is not only inhabited by the inhabitants but also their dramas. Drama's shaping affect comes from the dynamics of power that intersects and

overlaps as a form of business, friendships, territory, survival, and holding one's position on the block. In the context of everyday lives of people, drama usually has a rather negative tone: it means conflict and hunger for attention. Merriam-Webster online dictionary states that one definition for drama is "a state, situation, or series of events involving interesting or intense conflict of forces" – such as family drama.

I do not think that *Merriam-Webster* is the best place to rely on in the context of *Tangerine* and language used in the film, so I searched one of my favorite places to find better (and often funnier) definitions, the *Urban Dictionary* website. The most popular definition on the site states that drama is for example "[a] way of relating to the world in which a person consistently overreacts to or greatly exaggerates the importance of benign events. Typically 'drama' is used by people who are chronically bored or those who seek attention." Another user however gives much more nuanced and complex explanation of what drama is: "1. What people who don't like what you're saying or what you are passionate about think you're creating when you talk about it, especially if you do so often. 2. What people who know they are busted by whatever you are talking about call the topic when you bring it up, even if they aren't named." I really appreciate the latter definition and wanted to cite it because it reflects the reality of the block: drama is not (just) to seek attention, but it encloses a deeper understanding and dynamics of the relationships between the inhabitants, their vulnerabilities and emotions tied to their life situations.

Sin-Dee's drama takes different forms of loudness: the loudness associated with Sin-Dee's character and her drama tests limits and loyalty of her friendship with Alexandra. It is Sin-Dee's loud yelling to Nash, one of Chester's drug dealers she is interrogating, that eventually separates Sin-Dee and Alexandra before bringing them and their matching rhythmic high heels back together at Mary's and through Alexandra's performance. Loudness has barely never been considered as

suitable or favorable quality for women and in American societies it is a male privilege. As Liana Silva argues, “[i]t’s no coincidence then that describing a woman as loud is almost never said as a compliment... a man can be loud—he might even be expected to have a deep, booming, commanding voice” but women “who are ‘loud’ become noisy, rude, unapologetic, unbridled” (2015). Therefore, loudness does not mean high volume; it is constructed through gender but also race.

As Stoever states, whiteness represents itself both invisible and inaudible: “The inaudibility of whiteness stems from its considerably wider palette of representation and the belief that white representations stand in for ‘people’ in general, rather than ‘white people’ in particular. The inaudibility of whiteness does not mean it has no sonic markers” but that it is a result of a socialization process to understand what is (considered as) American identity (2016, 12). Especially women of color are marginalized sonically by their expressions of loudness often interpreted “as hostile, immature, angry, less intelligent, and/or divisive” (Stoever 2016, 23). When Sin-Dee is storming around the streets looking for Dinah, yelling at and threatening the people, she is also sonically attributing her gender and race to her body. If taken together with the *Urban Dictionary* definition of drama, Sin-Dee’s loudness as drama conceals a certain sense of honesty. While drama is associated with being a woman, Sin-Dee also defies the stereotyping with her powerful (even commanding) and unapologetic, while also at times problematically violent, loudness. Sin-Dee might not do it on purpose or even consciously, but her character playfully challenges through the drama the sonic gender binarism rather than trying to co-opt and assimilate to the system that expects her to control her sonic performance.

Tangerine effectively de-centralizes whiteness by centralizing Alexandra and Sin-Dee’s

friendship and drama as a habit that shapes the block. Whiteness is not something simply given, it is an investment. Ahmed argues that “we can talk of how whiteness is ‘attributed’ to bodies as if it were a property of bodies; one way of describing this process is to describe whiteness as a straightening device. We can ask how whiteness gets reproduced through acts of alignment, which are forgotten when we receive its line” (2006, 121). Ahmed adds that whiteness is a repetition of certain respectable bodies that are clean and straight (2006, 136). Sin-Dee’s, and also Alexandra’s, sonic production and loud drama is a form of resistance: when Ahmed states that whiteness is also a straightening device, with the same logic it is also a device of silencing and erasure of histories and identities for the two friends, the block and its inhabitants. As Stoeber points out, “black aural producers” also challenge how “white power structures have mobilized sound to define black racial identities” (2016, 19). *Tangerine* portrays a world where whiteness does not seem that desirable, where whiteness, the way its sounds and aesthetically looks like, does not become an attribute worth acquiring.

The sounds of drama come together with friendship through the final confrontation at the Donut Shop towards the end of the movie. “Calm before the storm” describes perfectly Sin-Dee’s entrance to the Donut Shop where Chester is taking care of his businesses, as he puts it. Sin-Dee walks in quietly and stands in front of Chester waiting for him to notice her. Dramatic music plays. Their first moments of communication are silent and non-verbal: they look at each other and go through a large scale of changing facial expressions. Sin-Dee challenges Chester for not picking her up when she got out of jail earlier that day and not buying her a Christmas present. For the first time, Sin-Dee talks with a soft voice and listens quietly to Chester’s pathetic explanations and excuses. They are the only customers at the Donut Shop and the silence reinforces the awkwardness and honest brutality of their relationships: Chester – when the listener-viewer finally

meets him – does seem to be exactly that man the girls on the block talk about, and they have said nothing nice about him. Even the traffic outside creates a monotonic and humming sound that is almost calming, like a part of the brief silence.

However, the storm is about to break when Sin-Dee tells that she has a gift for Chester. Electronic music starts playing: the melody is building toward climax and when the beat finally drops, Sin-Dee drags in Dinah. As a merry Christmas wish, Sin-Dee yells to Chester “fuck her, fuck her now!” Alexandra walks in to witness the showdown and the silence is broken by all the participants yelling. Soon Razmik walks in after looking for Sin-Dee all evening and wants to have a moment alone with her. The hell breaks again: now Chester is possessive about Sin-Dee and Sin-Dee is making fun of Chester. The dynamics take quick turns and navigate sonically through the loud yelling: here again loudness becomes associated with power. When Razmik’s mother-in-law arrives to the Donut Shop, a new kind of tension develops. Razmik’s mother-in-law wants to bust him for lying to his family that he is working on Christmas Eve, but she is not prepared to find out that Razmik is a familiar face on the block as a customer and that he has been having sex with the transgender women.

The yelling is now a cacophony of sounds and voices, and when Razmik’s wife makes an entrance with their baby, the couple’s life becomes an object of ridicule: Sin-Dee, Alexandra and Dinah all comment on the heterosexual family drama as if they were watching a tv-show. Razmik’s family problems are now on the territory where what is family and familiar are negotiated in different terms than through the ideals of the Occident. These differences and distances take a sonic form in the confrontation where the racial dynamics also shift. Stoeber points out that “white sonic identity imagines itself against circumscribed representations of how people of color sound. The

binary hierarchy of proper/improper marks one border of the sonic color line; the socially constructed divisions between sound/noise and quiet/loud mark two others” (2016, 12).

The final scene with all the noise and loudness shatter this binary, but the noise is directed also at the image of the respectable – the proper – white and straight family. The family members yell at each other, the baby cries. The girls’ snarky comments and humor about the heteronormative bliss and cheating—yelled and laughed out loudly—seem to be a commentary of something more: they refuse to be made fun of and being degraded because of their occupation, race and gender identities. Razmik’s mother-in-law’s mockery of the transgender sex workers attacks them on their own ground on the block which marks more than just economic survival; it is the communal and safe ground for the gender identities.

Alexandra and Sin-Dee’s sonic control over the family conflict reveals another interesting aspect: the laughter and commentary show the kind of both independence and co-dependency that is not experienced in Razmik’s nuclear family. Razmik’s wife is financially dependent on him and Razmik’s mother-in-law entangled in this dynamic as dependent on her daughter: the mother-in-law barely speaks English and does not seem to work either. The immigrant family obviously has their own difficulties which the listener-viewer sympathizes with, but at the same time the unquestioned value given to the nuclear family and difficulties it can bring in some ways symbolizes the freedom, independence and intimacy between the girls on the block.

The noise creates a place and space of mutual belonging. Bettcher discusses the creative use of language and the transgender individuals’ use of words as means of resistance and argues that fuller opposition to the wrong body model “requires recognizing the existence of multiple worlds of sense, worlds in which terms such as ‘woman’ have different, resistant meanings; worlds in which there exist different, resistant gender practices... The deployments of identity categories in

these contexts involve radical departures from dominant practices of gender” and allows to alter the meanings of terms (2014, 403). Yet, here these sounds and voices, the noise, drama and loudness resist the normative notions too. The words are not only ways to resist, but sounds, sonic performances and noise mark ownership over identities and territories. As Chandola articulates in her exploration of slums, the “noise” – sounds of the area the slum-dwellers inhabit – is what makes the slum home for its residents. I find similar analogy in the noise of confrontation in *Tangerine*: the noise is a refusal to accept labelling and moral judgements coming from outside the block and from people who are complicit in the existence of the block to begin with.

After the confrontation, Chester reveals that he and Alexandra had sex while Sin-Dee was arrested. Sin-Dee walks away and Alexandra, tearing up, follows her and tries to explain. The sound of their heels is now unrhythmic, the traffic flows and the siren of the fire truck passing by seems to alert about the emergency in Alexandra’s and Sin-Dee’s friendship. “It was only one time, it didn’t mean anything” say Alexandra to petrified Sin-Dee. When a car honks signalling for a client, Sin-Dee says, “[n]ow let me make my money and go the fuck home.” She walks cheerily to the car and her heels are clicking until the sound fades away. She puts on her sweet, sassy and seductive voice: “Hi, are we looking for a party...” The men in the car throw urine on Sin-Dee’s face and say, “Merry Christmas tranny faggot.”

Alexandra runs to Sin-Dee and takes her to a laundromat to wash Sin-Dee’s clothes. The friends sit in silence and wait. Sin-Dee’s reaction is worth examining a bit closer: her calmness about the transphobic attack compared to Chester’s cheating is remarkable. I feel that trying to analyze this would be largely guessing, but the moment is a good reminder to the listener-viewer about the universality of emotions and disappointments in love and how we all rely on trust and honesty in our important and intimate relationships. These feelings are not exclusive to the

Occident and exclusively and convincingly represented only by white, heterosexual, cis-gender people with clear definitions of how relationships and love work. The humming of cars passing by are in soothing tune with the comforting sound of dryers. While the friends are waiting for the moment to pass, Sin-Dee takes Alexandra's hand and they look at each other and smile. The movie ends on this quiet glimpse of how the Orient sometimes looks and sounds like from the perspective of its inhabitants.

The Sounds of Car and Sex Work

If the Orient is desired, it is both far away and also that which the Occident wishes to bring closer, as a wish that points to the future or even to a future occupation. The directedness toward this other reminds us that desire involves a political economy in the sense that is distributed: the desire to possess, and to occupy, constitutes others not only as objects of desire, but also as resources for world making. (Ahmed 2006, 115)

In *Tangerine*, the queer economics constitutes a world that is both shared and built collectively. What it means to be a trans* woman of color is partly shaped by the sex work. Ahmed states that a group, "a 'we' emerges as an effect of a shared direction toward an object" (2006, 117). I am taking such direction to examine in this section how the identity of being a transgender woman of color emerges also from the sex work.

The traffic in the film refers to something more than just cars passing by. Razmik is introduced through the very materiality of his taxi and his occupation as a taxi driver. Even though Razmik's role does not fit that easily into any particular definition and his character simultaneously portrays the complexity of being an immigrant, I want to situate him under the section of sex work as his character and interactions with the girls epitomize some aspects of how the client partakes in the negotiations of what gender means and what sex work is in *Tangerine*.

When Razmik's mother-in-law is upset and on her way to the Donut Shop after finding out

that Razmik has lied about working on the Christmas Eve, she says to Razmik's Armenian co-worker that "Los Angeles is a beautifully wrapped lie" while looking at the scenery from the car window. The Armenian taxi driver replies, "agree to disagree." This short verse of the conversation stuck in my mind because in many ways it describes both Razmik's and the sex workers' lives. The taxi driver's response is insightful because he knows the streets and how many different kinds of lives travels through them; for him, these are not lies but different ways for people trying to make a living: that people who are marginalized may have been promised something better in the exchange of their time and bodies but have ended up to solutions and situations that might seem like lies to those who are outsiders.

Razmik is introduced in the film as a relatively quiet taxi driver. The camera follows his day at work and because he does not converse too much, the sounds of his car become familiar to the listener-viewer at a very detailed level. His car radio plays music, his hands are confident but still relaxed on the wheel, the leather bench creaks and the repetition of blinker signal create a rhythm, or even a melody, when his car cruises down the streets. Because most of the sex work in *Tangerine* happens inside the clients' cars, the sounds of these vehicles come to portray relationships that are tied to the economic survival of the sex workers on the block. There are also moments of Alexandra and Sin-Dee travelling in the bus and its squeaky, clunky, almost sighing sounds echo on the background.

The sounds of cars, traffic and public transportation then point toward the friends who know the streets and the economic reality of being a trans* woman of color and racialized sex worker. The traffic sounds sonically align and orient the block as a very specific kind of phenomenal space, but the very physicality of sounds inside Razmik's car introduces a new perspective to the sex work on the block. Similarly, the repeating sound of Razmik's blinker

fascinates me. While it obviously signals his car taking a turn to either left or right, I am drawn to think of it as a sonic symbol of Ahmed's articulation of lines that align us to world: turning to somewhere that is available on the block for Razmik and the women who work there. The listener-viewer too is aligned to understand the economics of the block as intertwining with different kinds of relationships, gender identities, and lives with the very materiality of the block and this way skilfully guided to understand the complexity of what is *behind* the sex work.

The sound of cars guides also toward the connection between the transgender identities and sex work; or how the women negotiate their identities and power over their bodies through the very materiality of the work that often is often unsafe, without regulations and legal protection, and carries stigma. Before Razmik heads home for Christmas dinner after his shift, he notices a new girl on the block. Razmik whistles to get her attention and she gets in the car for a "business transaction" as Alexandra calls it in the film. Razmik keeps driving around and searching for a safe spot because Christmas Eve is a busy day. The listener-viewer follows this slow drive which makes Razmik's anticipation tangible through the sounds his body makes inside the car. Razmik admires the beauty of the new girl and slaps her thighs which makes a fleshy sound. The leather of the bench creaks constantly when Razmik moves impatiently holding his arm on the back rest and gazes at the girl.

Razmik tries to converse but the girl does not seem too eager to chat with him. Razmik asks the girl's name and says "[y]ou girls usually have exotic names." Not only does he refer with "you girls" to the racialized transgender sex workers as the sexually desired other from the Orient, he also hints toward some sort of mutuality between the client and the sex worker on the block. Razmik's encounter with the new girl reveals in a very concrete manner the way which genitals are what makes the block so "exotic." Razmik and the sex worker Selena finally finds a spot, Razmik

asks Selena to take off her panties because he wants to give, not receive, oral sex, to Selena's surprise.

The leather benches creak and echoes against the small inside space of the car and delivers the rather uncomfortable and tangible materiality of the car as a place for sex to the listener-viewer. After the sounds have built the momentum, Razmik finds out to now to his very unexpected surprise that Selena has a vagina (and that she is a cis-gender) and asks, "[w]hat is this?" Selena answers, "[i]t's a pussy." Razmik throws Selena out of the car and tells her that "the block is not for pussies." The sounds of car echoes throughout this interaction as a reminder that the block does not really offer privacy for the sex work, only the car does. The Orient can be the Orient only when the Occident, hence the cis-gender sex workers, stay away from the area and it is worth noting how their presence is not desired and valued either economically or as a part of the community.

Tangerine is not trying to deny the dangers that sex work often enclose for the transgender women and does not romanticize the sex work either; it brings it as a lived reality (but not as the only world) of many transgender women of color. *Tangerine* shows sex work as an occupation with real occupational hazards with inherent threat to violence and sometimes clients' unwillingness to pay. Through the intimate observations of Razmik driving his car, the listener-viewer finds something comforting, familiar and safe in its sonic dimensions; the listener-viewer is getting to know Razmik, the block and its streets. One of the scenes focuses on Razmik doing his work: the passenger change, the car radio is playing, sounds of cars on the road reaches the inside of his taxi. Razmik exchanges a few words with the clients but mostly the calming silence between the interactions and Razmik's calmness establishes the car as, if not safe, at least not the most dangerous place.

Such sense of safety in *Tangerine* is interesting contrast to the inherited danger of sex work

and how the calming sounds of Razmik's car come to symbolize the busy life and sex work on the block adds a layer to the Orient. Bettcher's theorization of the double-bind for transwomen addresses the danger by referring to the two alternatives of being a transgender woman: when one "comes out" as trans, she is a make-believer, pretender, a man who dresses like a woman and becomes a target of violence because of visible gender deviancy. When one "stays in the closet," she is a deceiver and becomes a target of violence because of this sexual deception. Bettcher states that "the rhetoric of deception appears deeply connected to deployments of gender attributions that run contrary to a transperson's own self-identifications" (2007, 47-50). Such rhetoric of

transphobic representations of transpeople as deceivers is an appearance-reality contrast between gender presentation and sexed body... we see identity enforcement embedded within a context of possible deception, revelation, and disclosure. In this framework, gender presentation (attire, in particular) constitutes a gendered appearance, whereas the sexed body constitutes the hidden, sexual reality. Expressions such as "a man who dresses like a woman," "a man who lives as a woman," and even "a woman who is biologically male" all effectively inscribe this distinction. (2007, 48)

When the girls get into Razmik's car, the double-bind stops existing for a moment. As Razmik's rejection of Selena shows, the girls on the block can and must be open about their transgender identities and bodies in order to survive, but in a way, this openness related to the body and sex work situates the block as a community that offers safety and acceptance. Such openness also separates the block as the Orient from the Occident through the inhabitants' acceptance of their own bodies: even though the sex work is not an ideal solution for economic survival, the block does not require the kind of assimilation to gender norms and binarism as the straight lines of the West do: while the block and sex work can be and sometimes is dangerous, it is also safety from the demands of West.

It is crucial to understand that the client who sexually desires a transgender woman with a

penis can be and often is transphobic: the client's sexual preferences does not mean he recognizes and understands the self-definitions of the transgender women and what constitutes being a woman for the transgender women themselves. This is why the block is the Orient, a separate world from the Occident. However, the sonic world brings the sex work close to the listener-viewer and particularly Razmik's car and its mundane sounds are very much attached to the reality of how the sex work happens, why it happens, and how it happens.

The car provides a setting and soundscape for the sexual act itself. When Alexandra runs into Razmik after going separate ways with Sin-Dee and having an incident with a client earlier the day, she is delighted. Alexandra jumps in his car and tells about her long day. They drive into a car wash and Alexandra says, "I think this is becoming our favorite spot." "Just the wash," Razmik says when they enter their office of the day. Not only do the sounds of car wash represent the oral sex, but also the very materiality of the act is transmitted through the brushes roughly taking over the car and its outer surface.

Razmik's head is bent down between Alexandra's legs and the listener-viewer watches them from the back-seat perspective. The listener-viewer cannot hear anything else than the wash: the big round brushes first intensely wash the car with a fierce touch and speed, then slow down and move away to make space for the wet and soapy mop literally slapping the car, and finally comes the rinsing water spraying all over the car. Razmik and Alexandra finish when the car wash finishes. The sounds of the car wash bring to the listener-viewer different layers of performances associated with the block: the sonic, the sex and the roles taken, gender and the transgender body. The intense sounds of the car wash are tactile; the idea of touch that is transmitted through the washing brushes form a representation of the kind of shaping and aligning contacts, some of them literally haptic, the block encloses.

I want to bring together the sounds of car with sex work and transgender identities because first of all, the women on the block discuss their bodies and genitals as the cars and possible clients pass by and the women try to catch their attention. These discussions together with the soundscape of the cars articulate a certain kind instrumentality of the sex work on the block, but also a resistance to the dominant definitions of gender and transgender identities. These conversations are often snarky and witty but for a reason. The language in *Tangerine* defies the medical notions of transgender identities and the block offers a space to understand, examine, challenge and accept gender outside the legal and medical norms of the Occident.

The Musicality of Sass and Emotions

For Merleau-Ponty the habitual body is a body that acts in the world, where actions bring other things near... The body is 'habitual' not only in the sense that it performs actions repeatedly, but also in the sense that when it performs such actions *it does not command attention*... In other words, the body is habitual insofar as it 'trails behind' in the performing of an action; insofar as it does not pose 'a problem' or an obstacle to the action, or it is not 'stressed' by 'what' the action encounters. (Ahmed 2006, 130)

The musical score of *Tangerine* deserves and needs its own section. Quinn O'Gallagher summarizes the musical excellency of the film rather well: "*Tangerine*'s score is...impressive, with most of it downloaded from Soundcloud for cheap, it mixes-together the sounds of hip-hop, synth and string quartets, electrifying us from the very first frame. So, if *Tangerine* is an aesthetic and technological achievement, why then is it swept to the margins, excluded from the online feeds of our #OscarsSoWhite discussion?" Especially against the ethereal and ambient nature sounds in *Girls Lost*, the electronic soundscape of *Tangerine* seems to reflect the fluidity and performativity of gender as something one can "engineer" by herself, that is open to modifications and new twists (like electronic music usually is). The music in *Tangerine* moves bodies, places; scenes and

situations transition through the music. Drawing from Ahmed and Merleau-Ponty, I want to think of the music as habitual sound in *Tangerine*; that it has embodied and historical dimensions.

How Alexandra and particularly furious Sin-Dee move on the streets, how they depart and greet, and how frustrations, sadness, anger, determination and sass are articulated in the film happens through their own musical styles. Music does not just speak for emotions, it expresses them. The same musicality plays in the speech and the way the girls on the block talk to each other: their tone of voice and choice of words are playful and quirky. The acting body in *Tangerine* is a musical body, the habitual body has a habitual sound. Christine Ehrick states that “[t]hinking historically about gendered soundscapes can help us conceptualize sound as a space where categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ are constituted within the context of particular events over time, and by extension the ways that power, inequality and agency might be expressed in the sonic realm—in other words, tuning in to sound as a signifier of power” (2015). I consider the music as important soundscape in *Tangerine* as it deals with race and gender (as bodily) performance.

Alexandra and Sin-Dee departing and going their own ways is a musical event. After Sin-Dee harasses Nash and Alexandra gives up and walks away, Sin-Dee steals Nash’s last cigarette, steps out of the restaurant-office, and a dramatic classical music starts playing: First hesitantly and building up the momentum with strings. Sin-Dee’s heels click and clack when she hits the streets. Soon the orchestra plays a hectic-sounding melody with strings when Sin-Dee walks around asking for a light, the music stops when she finally lights the cigarette and then starts again: the dramatic music clearly portrays the distressed Sin-Dee. She is looking around as if trying to figure out which direction to take and finally sits down to smoke her cigarette. Sin-Dee’s facial expressions change and she seems to be plotting something. The traffic passes by, busses come and go, she keeps looking around and her bodily movements are getting more and more frustrated while she is having

her supposedly relaxing cigarette break. Electronic music starts playing simultaneously with the classical one, Sin-Dee says “[f]uck it,” the beat drops and an up-beat electronic music starts playing when she walks with full confidence and determination to the subway.

It feels like Sin-Dee’s body moves through the music and that her body movements are the instruments playing the music. The musicality of bodies in *Tangerine* is a form of habituality and what is available and in reach for the bodies. Ahmed argues that habits “do not just involve the repetition of ‘tending forward,’ but also involve the incorporation of that which is ‘tended toward’ into the body. These objects extend the body by extending what it can reach. Reachability is hence an effect of the habitual, in the sense that what is reachable depends on what bodies ‘take in’ as objects that extend their bodily motility, becoming like a second skin” (2006, 131). While the music plays, the playfulness of Sin-Dee’s body is attached to the music: she jumps down the escalator stairs, she walks like she’s on a catwalk, she jumps over the subway gate, her body and its motility know the city and the streets. These movements orchestrated and embraced by the music give agency to Sin-Dee’s body on the block and allows her to reach to and take control of what is around her. The very physicality of Sin-Dee is musically sounded out like this throughout the movie: she shows up somewhere, stirs the pot, upsets people and electronic music starts playing while her body moves on the streets, knowingly, and never seems to stop.

I want to be more specific with the music genre as most often Sin-Dee is associated with Trap, which is a combination of dubstep and hip hop, but the musical score includes indie electronic synth pop. Trap is known for its roots in Black communities in Atlanta and that the genre draws its foundation and themes from poverty, drug dealing and street life. When Ahmed says that we inherit “proximities rather than attributes,” she might just as well be talking about the music’s meaning in *Tangerine*: “This means that we also inherit forms of bodily and social distance: those

that are ‘at home’ (they must be near enough), but who are marked as ‘further’ away even in the face of proximity” (2006, 126-127). The music speaks for certain kind of inheritance and circulation of affects, but Sin-Dee’s sass also comes from the music. Her high heels hit the beat to the rhythmic songs to confirm that she is here to make some noise. Yet, the music shows a specific kind of inherited proximity through how Sin-Dee’s habitual body knows how it works in the economic environment of the block: she is the woman of the streets – a girl from the block – like many other transgender women of color ends up being as a result of the inherited effect of marginalization.

Another kind of up-tempo electronic music plays when Alexandra departs with Sin-Dee and goes on her own way: the music is more serious and organized; she walks straightforward to the streets and to the beat of the music, but unlike Sin-Dee, her body remains in same posture and lacks the childlike goofiness of Sin-Dee. Yet, Alexandra’s song is confident and firmly attaches her to the streets when she returns for work after the conflict with Sin-Dee. The electronic music does not flow; it literally and sonically pulses through its beats throughout the movie the same way the streets are busy and lively. The music also expresses disorientation. When Sin-Dee is visibly and visually violent toward Dinah, the disorienting and dissociating music creates an auditory and aural space. The sonic nuances are Sin-Dee’s response to the feelings of being betrayed, hurt, rejected and cheated on because these are the kind of vulnerabilities she does not discuss or disclose verbally.

The final scene after the confrontation at the Donut Shop portrays a tired group of people departing on their own ways. Ethereal, slow and slightly melancholic music composes the moment of exhaustion and silent reflection. While the music plays and the camera films each of the character by themselves, the loneliness of the streets (and co-dependency of the characters) echoes

to the listener-viewer. Dinah walks back to the motel, but another girl has already replaced her. Razmik comes back home with his family but is left to stand alone and helpless in the living room where the merry lights of the Christmas tree remind the listener-viewer what day it is: the joyous day of being together with your loved ones. Chester could not care less about Dinah or Sin-Dee. Only Alexandra follows Sin-Dee and the slowness of the music speaks for their connection and friendship, not abandonment or rejection. Emotions are not discussed in *Tangerine*; they are transmitted sonically through music. The musical choices, such as Trap and the beautiful ambient in the end, both point toward specific shared directions, embodied and shared history, an affinity.

Chapter Conclusion

In my analysis of sounds and themes in *Tangerine*, I have centralized the block as the Orient and its loudness with sounds of traffic, high heels and drama as a space for community, friendship and intimacy. The sounds of the Orient might not exactly be desired, but they speak for the lived realities of the transgender women of the color on the block and the sex work they rely on as economic survival strategy. By focusing on the sounds of the streets, the high heels of Alexandra and Sin-Dee, the sounds of a car that materializes the sex work, and the musicality of the habitual bodies, I have built the block as the Orient and a world of its own that resists the desirability of the West.

The sounds of the traffic and loudness of the characters guide and align also the listener-viewer towards the importance of friendship: the transgender identities in *Tangerine* emerge from the closeness and caring of the community – even when the community is spatially defined by the cars that always pass by and never stop. The resistance to the white ideals and norms of both

gender and race is also present in the loudness – the noise – that define the moments of confrontations in Sin-Dee’s search for justice (or revenge).

The characters take sonic control over the moments when they are made fun of and through such act practice power over their lives and definitions given to them by the Occident. Similarly, the music that moves and orchestrates the bodies allows both Alexandra and Sin-Dee to perform their habitual bodies and gender identities as individuals with their own histories and lived experiences. What *Tangerine* offers through its sonic dimensions is multiple layers to understand the marginalized community of transgender women of color and resistance to the stories that remove transgender identities from their physical, material, economic, but also (sub-)cultural locations.

CHAPTER V

Concluding Discussion

As I am finishing and wrapping up my film analysis, I have watched *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* what feels like countless times. Every single re-watching of the films has offered me something new to think about the transgender lives the films represent. Approaching *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* through Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology and looking what is behind – not just what is visible, but what is audible – has allowed me to ask a question that is often neglected as epistemologically important and meaningful: What kind of stories do I *hear* when I watch and listen to these movies?

While *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* both explore what it means and feels to be a transgender individual or question one's gender identity, the sound design and sounds of these films tell something about gender in general: what kind of gender discourses does the sonic world reveal (even if the film might avoid addressing such ideas in the verbal and visual story)? What are the cultural, material and individual conditions for the gender identities to emerge? How does the sonic spatiality align the characters to the world as gendered beings, and through such aligning, suggest how gender and sexuality are attributed to our bodies?

In my thesis, I have brought together two very different kind representations of transgender lives, two very different kind of conversations of gender and two very different soundscapes. *Girls Lost* surrounds the characters and the listener-viewer with ethereal ambient music together with sounds of nature. The moments of magical transformation are narrated through both imagery and sounds that draw from biological and medical notions of sex/gender and Kim's emerging transgender identity becomes examined first and foremost as bodily distress. While the magical sounds that establish the film as a unique and subtle exploration of gender and allow the listener-

viewer's imagination to do its own magic, the sounds attached to Kim also call to mind Bettcher's discussion of the wrong body model that portrays one as a transgender individual simply born in the wrong body or trapped in the wrong body.

Because *Girls Lost* conflates gender with body and transgender identity with bodily stress through the film's sonic world, it never really gets to a deeper discussion or representation of Kim's emerging identity as a boy despite the film's seemingly performative understanding of gender. *Girls Lost* seems to understand gender as performative through its cis-gender characters but not so much through Kim's transgender identity. The sounds of Kim's transformation from a girl to boy leave very little room to understand that transgender identities are not necessarily and simply bodily experiences; that being transgender might not be a medical or biological distress. Yet, at the same time the sonic and bodily distress portrays tangibly well how Kim's emerging gender identity is something she needs to face alone, without help and support from anyone or anything around her.

Tangerine contextualizes transgender identities in a very different manner through the sonic world of hectic streets of Los Angeles. The film situates gender in a very particular place and space as a reminder that gender and gender identities do not exist in vacuum. The transgender identities in *Tangerine* emerge from the sounds of traffic and high heels on the pavement, the loudness of interactions and drama, and musicality of the bodies of Alexandra and Sin-Dee. Through such soundscape, the film places the transgender women of color on the block designated for sex work. In my analysis, I have examined the ways which *Tangerine* addresses race through Ahmed's theorization of the Orient that racializes bodies by creating embodied distances. The Orient is a what the white, heterosexual and heteronormative Occident is not and therefore the ideals of the white West are always constructed against the Orient.

In my analysis of *Tangerine*, I have discussed how Alexandra, Sin-Dee and the inhabitants of the block resist the whiteness of the West as desirable. Drawing from Stoeber's theorization of a sonic color line that sonically marks race and racializes spaces, I have used the concept of noise (often attached to people of color) as an analytical tool to explain how the characters make both literal and figurative noise to resist the historical silencing and erasure of lives of transgender women of color. In my analysis, the block as the Orient is a place for self-acceptance and self-definition; despite the racialized transgender sex workers' marginalized position, it gives agency and independency to its inhabitants.

Girls Lost and *Tangerine* show how film sounds form an auditory space of gender; that gender is attached to space and place and the characters as gendered beings can become detached from their environments through sounds. Sounds enclose a spatiality that includes a sense and feeling of belonging—or of not belonging. In *Girls Lost*, such space manifests through soundscape that isolates Kim, Momo and Bella from their surroundings and situates them to their own world of friendship, safety and intimacy. The moments when the girls connect also separate them from the rest of the world by replacing the sounds of the surrounding space with ethereal ambience; the music blurs the physical location. By doing this, *Girls Lost* is perceptive about the objectification of the pubescence girls' bodies and through such sounds of isolation, it captures the distress and anger the girls feel. While Kim, Momo and Bella as friends portray great deal of independence in how they use their time and navigate through the small Swedish harbor town, their belonging is tied to the sounds of intimacy of their friendship, not to their environment.

Girls Lost skilfully uses sounds to depict the sexualization and objectification of the girls' bodies and, specifically, how women's bodies are inherently targets of violence. The film portrays such lack of agency through disconnecting sounds and, similarly, the growing distance between the

friends is built sonically. The distancing and isolating sounds speak powerfully for the loneliness and lack of acceptance Kim experiences when she questions her gender identity, but the sounds also remove her struggle from larger social contexts. As a result of the transformations, the sonic world of Kim changes, but it also now encloses sounds of danger and that she is playing with fire with her relationship to Tony, who denies his homosexuality. The listener-viewer comes to realize that the surrounding world is much more present for the boys than it is for the girls: when Kim, Momo and Bella are boys, the sounds of the surrounding world become closer and crystal clear, but the world of the boys masks and hides emotions and moments of intimacy.

In contrast to *Girls Lost*, it is fascinating how the stereotypically stressful sounds considered as noise, such as traffic, connect the characters with each other and attach them to the world they occupy in *Tangerine*. Even when things are tough, the sounds of the streets and music move their bodies and never situate them in isolation, passivity or loneliness. The sounds bring Alexandra and Sin-Dee together even after a moment of betrayal and such closeness highlights the importance and co-dependency of queer lives and survival. In *Tangerine*, the sonic world of the friends is busy, but it does not push them away: instead, it invites the friends to participate and be in charge of the streets and identities.

The sounds of *Tangerine* compose the very materiality of marginalization without victimizing its characters or pushing them into passivity and despair, a drastic difference between the two films. Despite that Alexandra and Sin-Dee are sex workers and participate in such form of queer economics to survive, their lives are not defined only through their occupation. In fact, the spatial sounds of car as a place for sex brings the sex work to the listener-viewer as a tangible reality, but it also portrays how the sex work allows the women on the block to discuss and

represent their identities ways that are meaningful to them. These discussions function as means to resist medical definitions of transgender identities.

The sounds in both films are sonic narratives of gender: they align the characters with what is available or within reach for them and their gendered bodies and their stories build through and together with the sonic elements. Whereas each character in *Tangerine* has their own sonic dimensions, and the sounds narrate the characters into existence as individual beings, *Girls Lost* does not differentiate its characters in a similar manner. In *Girls Lost*, only Kim is highlighted through the sounds of transformation: her bodily distress and questioning of gender identity is what makes her individual, but how she is as a person with other qualities and quirks remains silent. Alexandra and Sin-Dee instead have their own thematic music genres that match their habitual bodies and sounds of their interactions and encounters, such as Sin-Dee's loud drama, which allows the listener-viewer to meet the characters and their world with the kind of anticipation that Merleau-Ponty sees in the phenomenological world. The listener-viewer comes to know the characters through the sounds as crucial parts of their individual narratives.

So, what makes sound analysis of these two films, or films in general, important? While sounds and sound design are occult in a sense that they are in the background and enclose creative potential and ambiguity for interpretations, they are still something that infiltrate the listener-viewer's understanding. Sounds are hard to escape from (unless you turn off the volume, of course) and they guide the story much more we might think. Sounds can be affective epistemologies of things difficult or impossible to articulate. Both *Girls Lost* and *Tangerine* sound distances and proximities, what is and is not in reach for the characters.

Sometimes visual representations are reductive and exclusive, as I have discussed in my

theory review. I do not intend to say that this could not be the case with sounds, but I suggest that the materiality, spatiality but also fluid nature of sounds offer a queer (and) phenomenological possibilities to articulate emotions of how gendered bodies meet the world. Sounds enclose meaningfulness and they can meaningfully and authentically tell about locations of gender identities and queer moments. Sounds challenge notions of gender and sexuality as rigid categories, making sonic experiences of gender a new and valuable addition to gender studies. Similarly, ideologies, images and stereotypes concerning gender and sexuality are methodologically revisited and epistemologically re-examined when the analysis of films includes sounds as (re)sources of expressions of identities and lived realities.

I want to end with thoughtful words from Karla Berrens, who examines the sounds as intimate connections to identities:

Ensounding our bodies with the soundscape and listening to its sounds purposefully and consciously contribute towards the resurfacing of our emotions and orientations. This in turn facilitates the emergence of cartography of place composed from our emotional reactions to the space's soundscapes... When we attend to space through sound, we are no longer tied up in the mirroring relationship the mind establishes with space, there is no longer the separation between us and an object, hence creating a distance between us and space. (Berrens 2016, 80)

Sounds are in us and within us; they form a dialogue between the body, the human being, and the environment. By sounding out the marginalized gender identities and sexualities, hearing and listening becomes a central and affective aspect of the relationship between the listener and the source – the subject – of the sound. Because sounds form new auditory spaces while also sounding out previous locations and memories, they can redefine and change cartographies and geographies of margins as isolated peripheries. And because sounds play with our perception of the world, they can bring places, their histories and both individual and collective identities through film to the listener-viewer.

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