

General Editor's Introduction

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I have long been confounded, as a brown transsexual as much as a scholar and historian of trans of color life, with the realism ascribed to the 2015 film *Tangerine*, a Sundance hit that chronicles the Christmas Eve of Sindee and Alexandra, two trans women of color and best friends hustling the streets of Los Angeles. Certainly the film's director, Sean Baker, who describes *Tangerine* as "an entertaining film and socialist-realist film," lent the term to critics and reviewers. Much was likewise made of the fact that *Tangerine* was shot entirely on iPhones with two lead actresses who actually lived in the life, serving as Baker's supposed "conduit to the world of transgender prostitution around the Hollywood intersection of Santa Monica Boulevard and Highland Avenue," as one review put it (Thompson 2015). Yet the claim of realism, of the specific location and authenticity of Sindee's and Alexandra's performances, has always struck me as infelicitous. Much like the cis men who buy sex from the protagonists, the celebration of *Tangerine's* ostensible realism has always seemed, to me, to say much more about the desires and projective expectations of its audience than what the film depicts—a work of fiction, need it be repeated, no matter how much it might be said to be verité.

Why would Sindee and Alexandra reflect realism as opposed to, say, *realness*, a term actually invented by Black and brown trans femmes? Perhaps the answer has something to do with how trans women of color and Black trans women, especially when saturated with sensational narratives of sex work, poverty, and transsexual desire, have long been a punching bag for not only mass culture but also high theory. Think only of Judith Butler's (1997) egregious (but quite typical for queer theory at the time) reading of Venus Xtravaganza's death in *Paris Is Burning* as some kind of inevitable comeuppance for her literal failure and ideological failure to be queer enough to righteously subvert the desire for a happy, safe life. Even in the 1990s, when the word *transgender* was still in its Anglo-American infancy, both as a term used by social service organizations working with poor trans women of color sex workers and as an umbrella category for

nonmedical identities that differed from transsexuality (Valentine 2007), queer theory was willing to indict realness with a failure to be realist because Black and brown femmes dared to desire to be beautiful, legendary, safe, loved, and secure.

In other words, perhaps *Tangerine's* reception as realism instead of realness is as much a matter of wishful nostalgia as anything else. In seeing Sindee and Alexandra as tragic, however sincere and sympathetic trans women of color trapped by their circumstances, the audience is both able to imagine they are peeping at a prurient subculture while also reassuring themselves that things are changing and that Sindee and Alexandra do not represent the transgender future. Rather, they would incarnate an atavistic transsexual and transvestite past from which they will be recuperated, one day, by the inexorable rise in liberal trans inclusion that is supposed to typify the twenty-first century despite the overwhelming evidence that nothing of the sort is occurring but for the whitest, most propertied.

This issue of *TSQ*, “The Transsexual/Transvestite Issue,” marks a powerful objection to the dominant figuration of “trans” in the field. Skeptical of what has been forgotten, erased, suppressed, and racialized in the passage from a “post-transsexual theory” (Stone 1992) to “trans studies” (Stryker 2020), editors Emmett Harsin Drager and Lucas Platero ask temporal and geographical questions that seem long overdue. What ever happened to the transsexual and the transvestite, the two primary signifiers of trans life for the majority of the twentieth century? How is it that the ascendancy of *transgender* and then *trans* has periodized trans identity, life, and appearance, so that the transsexual and the transvestite are seen as relics of the past, when in fact there are many transsexuals and transvestites living in the trans metropolises of the global North? Similarly, how has an implicit geopolitics of trans as a colonial marker of modernity—or postmodernity, depending on whom you ask—relegated the transsexual and the transvestite to the global South? This thoroughly colonial temporality and geography, by which the transsexual and transvestite are backward, literal, or failed trans social forms displaced in the metropole by contemporary trans and nonbinary identities, or remain only in racialized global South contexts where they are implicitly parochial, provincial, and too particular to signify as the subjects of the field of trans studies, deserves a thorough critique.

As *TSQ* continues to reckon with the English-language domination and American centrism of trans studies, issues like these, helmed by Harsin Drager, a historian working on the unacknowledged racial history of trans patients in American gender clinics, and Platero, a trans studies scholar based in Spain, offer an important transnational model that builds on previous special issues. So it is that this issue's dozen plus articles cover not just subterranean or overlooked American case studies in the erasure of transvestites and transsexuals but are joined with extensive work on Spain and Latin America, where differences of

language, racial schemas, colonialism, political structures, and categories provincialize any simple recuperation effort. This issue does not rescue the transsexual and transvestite from their relegation to the past or global South; on the contrary, it dissolves the very temporal and geographical imaginary through which that relegation would function. This issue brings forth instead rich and incommensurable analyses of *travestis*, transsexuals, gays and lesbians, Black transvestites, sex workers, and many other heterogenous social forms that do not submit to a north/south, past/present, American/non-American rubric. Likewise, the issue's contributors are nearly half non-American or scholars working primarily in Spanish. Significant thanks are due to Josh Marzano and Lucas Platero for assisting me with translations.

While interrupting the temporal and geographical current of trans studies to treat the transvestite and transsexual as meaningful and irreducibly different social forms in different times and places, each of the articles in the issue also offers substantial interventions at once historiographical, theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and political. Marta Vicente's opening essay illustrates how transgender, "a category created to include all trans* experiences," has expressly failed to do so. RL Goldberg's history of trans erotic pulp novels offers an essential reading of how narratives of forced feminization, sissification, and the erotic field of gender transitivity relied on a narrative environment of whiteness contrasted with Black gender, which was fantasized by contrast as stolid and unchangeable. Beans Velocci turns the history of transsexual medicine on its head by showing the degree to which transsexuality was not a matter of clinical ontology (that is, being a woman or man) but rather a functional matter of whether patients passing would protect surgeons from lawsuits. Turning to the Canary Islands, Dania Curbelo's poetic oral histories with transsexuals and travestis from the island's *barrancos* (ravines) curates an impressive vernacular archive of indigenous and antifascist resistance to Spanish dictatorial rule. Writing about the metropole of Barcelona, Iñaki Estella's essay on the travesti cabarets of the waning years of the Franco regime show how trans political resistance can germinate in the private or intimate sphere, behind closed doors, before it moves into the streets. And finally, Patricio Simonetto and Johana Kunin's reading of Argentinian travesti and transsexual public figure Mariela Muñoz's remarkable nationalist, maternal politics upsets easy relegations of transsexuals and travestis to the outside of the political, or as always already radical subjects in relation to the state.

These six articles are followed by a special section, "Transsexual/Transvestite Scrapbook," which pays homage to one of the most important handmade and do-it-yourself mediums employed by transsexuals and transvestites—and, not coincidentally, one of the most abundant, albeit privately generated and owned, of archives. The scrapbook is a multimedia collection of short images, objects, or other archival fragments from a range of locations around the world mirroring

the locations of the issue's research articles. Each scrapbook item is accompanied by a short reflection written by the person who submitted it, both placing it in context and, in some cases, reflecting on their personal and intimate relationship with it. This loving tribute to the incommensurability and heterogeneity of the lives that travel under the signs *transsexual* and *transvestite* is a humble and mundane reminder that trans life cannot be contained by any taxonomy or heuristic, nor need it be.

The cover image for this issue, likewise, is drawn from the personal archive of Lindsey Shively's cousin Robert, whose photobooks of femme4femme life in the San Francisco Bay Area work much like the closing scene of *Tangerine*, in which all the cisgender characters in the film are alone and in grief on Christmas Eve, while Sindee and Alexandra find themselves in a laundromat, together. The final shot of the film shows them making up after the climactic fight of the film's diegesis, reaching their hands for one another in sisterhood. What strikes me about this moment is how these two femmes of color show, but don't tell, all it is that they know, that they live, and that makes them happy together, unlike the cis cast of the film. When we look at a cover image of two femmes like the one for this issue, it is worth practicing humility. There is far more that we do *not* know about transsexuals and transvestites than we ever will, but this is nothing like a deficit or lack to which trans studies is the appointed heir and savior. In their colorful and resplendent ephemerality, these trans femmes remind us that it is at best our radical humility as interested and thoughtful scholars that grants us access to the rich worlds of those who have truly *lived* at the margins of not just the social but also the field of trans studies.

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