Black Lesbian, Gay and Transgender
Representations in Films:
Stereotypes, Power Relations and Gender Roles
An intersectional analysis of the films *Set It Off, Tangerine* and *Moonlight*

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Master’s Programme
Gender Studies – Intersectionality and Change

Master’s thesis 15 ECTS credits
Abstract
This thesis investigates the black lesbian, gay, transgender representations in three US-American films. Using feminist film theory and intersectionality theory, the thesis analyzes the films *Set It Off*, *Tangerine* and *Moonlight*. This analysis includes three themes: 1) Stereotypes including drugs, violence and low socioeconomic status 2) Power relations including white and/or heterosexual supremacy 3) Representation of gender. Overall the study seeks to understand and explore the ways of how intersections between class, race, gender, and sexuality are represented along with the three themes.

Number of pages: 49.

Keywords
Intersectionality, feminist film studies, black, lesbian, gay, transgender, film representations
Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the help and guidance of my supervisor Vera Weetzel. I am deeply grateful to them in the completion of this dissertation.

I would like to show appreciation to my mother Ulviye and my sister Isin who encouraged me in every step of this process. I am truly grateful to them for making me believe that love maintains strong no matter how far they are. I would also like to thank my soul sister Fatma Nur Ozogul (Dado) for always being heartening, patient and supportive of my decisions. I could not have completed this effort without a love of my friend Tegiye Birey, whose presence was my main motivation during this process. I would also like to thank my dear cat Dilly who has been around all the time and makes me feel cheerful. Thank you all.
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1. Introduction

Throughout the cinema history, cinematic representation of the black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, + individuals has been informed by white LGBTI+ supremacy. Yet it is no wonder that representation of the white LGBTI+ people has long been overshadowed by hegemonic white heterosexual images in films. Representation has long been an issue in films, particularly concerning race, gender, sexuality and class. The term *representation* has been defined in various ways. One of the most important contributions to the development of the concept has been made by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988, pp. 275-276) who makes a distinction between *vertreten*, which refers to ‘speaking for’ as in political representation, and *darstellen*, which means ‘representing’ as in art and philosophy. Spivak argues that the vertreten-darstellen modes of representation reproduces ‘othering’, which is embedded in the unequal power relations in association with the Western representation of the Other. Put differently, the “Others”, which refers to oppressed subjects, are reproduced by the assumptions of the West, which, at the end, can both speak for and silence them. Similarly, hooks (1990, p.155) argues that the images of the oppressed subjects are not represented as they really are, but rather represent the images as ‘seen through the lens of the oppressor group.’ Representations in the mass media in general and the mainstream films in particular influence the perceptions of the audiences by all means. The word ‘audiences’ does not merely refer to a group of viewers or listeners, yet, in a sense, refers to individuals who make up the society. In this regard, films hold an importance in reflecting, constructing or reinforcing the reality. As hooks (1996, p. 9) states, movies do not merely reflect the culture, rather they make the culture.

Norms of the US-American mainstream cinema have been shaped through a focus on white,

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1 LGBTI+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and all other marginalized sexual orientations and gender identities. Yet the thesis focuses only on lesbian, gay and transgender representations in films. There are two reasons behind this choice: Firstly, this is due to methodological reasons. This thesis uses an intersectional approach which is not convenient with some films with bisexual characters (see: *Nowhere* 1997; *Relax…It’s just sex* 1998; *She hate me* 2004). And the second reason is because the thesis aims to analyze films after the 1990s since black heterogeneity appeared in films in the 1990s, therefore films shot before 1990s was not used in the thesis (*Born in flames* 1983; *The color purple* 1985). Beside this asexuality which is included in + has not been represented openly in any films.
cisgender, heterosexual representations. Since the focus is mainly on representing supremacist characters in films, it becomes reasonable to argue that the perceptions of the audiences towards such identities have been diverse. That is to say, white characters in films, for example, do not necessarily portray singular obtrusive stereotypical roles, therefore, the audiences become likely to code those images by a wide range of senses. On the other hand, the black representation in films seems to be locked into a singular perception since the black performers have been mainly casted stereotypical roles in the US-American films. Discussion of similar power relations can be found in Mohanty’s (1988) paper in which she argues that the dominance of Western feminism fails to consider differences between non-Western women by constructing the homogenous perception of Third World woman in a monolithic way.

Black images in films started to be represented as devoted servants and oversexual men in the early 20th century. Moreover, in the film The Birth of a Nation2 stereotypical representation of black men was played by white actors in blackfaces (Merritt 2008, p. 109). In the 1930s, early African American independent film directors emerged. In contrast with the Hollywood’s Eurocentric models, they started to use various characters in films including black doctors, lawyers, businessmen and women, preachers, laundresses, engineers, and skilled laborers (p. 110). Beside this, the black female perspective in cinema emerged in the same era (p. 110). After World War II, the black independent films became commercially unsuccessful, and accordingly, African American film production widely disappeared (Heiling 2009, p. 32). The black representation in films reappeared in the 1970s with the emergence of Blaxploitation movies. Despite the growth in black representation, stereotypical roles remained reproduced in the following years. Yet, this time, stereotypes shifted from passive roles to heroic figures, including supermales, pimps, gangsters (p. 33). Even though black audience enjoyed to see heroic figures that were not the source of humiliation anymore, the problem of using stereotypes has remained. This time the wildly sexual black man image had been created by the white society (ibid.). In a similar way, black women had been represented in an asexual, nurturing servility or a threatening, pathological sexuality and dominance (p. 91). Following this, Black heterogeneity appeared in US-American films in the 1990s. It was a moment when black gays and black women found voice (Guerrero 1993).

2 The Birth of a Nation (1915) is a D. W. Griffith’s silent film.
2. Aim and Research Problem

The US-American film industry has been the dominant visual culture globally since the very beginning of the film industry due to the rapid commercialization of new technologies in the country (Acheson & Maule 1994, p. 289) and its marketing oriented nature. Nevertheless its enduring dominance cannot be explained by a single explanation (Silver 2007, p. 358). Considering that in most countries the US-American films predominate in the top 10 films, the cultural globalization it creates results in national cultures to face with a threat (Crane 2014, pp. 365-368). On the other hand, there are countries where its dominance has not reached. India, for example, has local films appear on the top 10 lists in country’s film market (ibid.). Moreover, differently from the dominant US-American film industry, Indian film industry offers non-hegemonic popular culture, which does not have the same homogenising influence on non-Indian cultures to adopt its norms and practices (Matusitz & Payano 2012, p. 123). In this regard, it is important to engage with a discussion of the significance of representations in the US-American films.

This study will investigate black lesbian, gay and transgender representations in three US-American films. Although much has been written on black representation in films there has been no comprehensive analysis that draws upon intersectionality and feminist film theory to explain how stereotypes, white and/or cisgender heterosexual supremacy and gender inequalities have been continuously reproduced. The thesis investigates how those dimensions are interrelating in order to fully understand the US-American films’ way of representing black lesbian, gay and transgender identities. That is to say, the current paper aims to analyze the approach of US-American films to black lesbian, gay, transgender representations. As underlined by Lykke (2010) critical analysis is a necessity in the way to gain understandings in dominant/included/majoritized positions and how the intersections of subordinated/excluded/ minoritized positions are built. In this regard, this paper attempts to analyze three films to find a question of what it is like to be a black lesbian, black gay and black transgender person and how such identities are represented in white, cisgender and heterosexual system of social dominance.

Societies learn what and how to think about the social identities from mass media (Cooper 2002, p. 365). Therefore, it is crucial to increase the number of studies that focus on the representation of social identities in the media in order to offer new possibilities in representations and to assert the
importance of a system without oppression, domination or discrimination. The 2 films which 
are subjects of this study are, *Moonlight* and *Set It Off* are examples of Hollywood cinema, whilst 
*Tangerine* is an example of an US-American independent film. Therefore, it will be engaging to 
find out whether the films differ depending on their genres. *Set It Off* represents two black lesbian 
characters, while *Tangerine* portrays two black transgender sex workers. Finally, *Moonlight* 
represents black gay man. Besides gender and sexual orientation, the three films share some other 
common items as it is shown in the table below:

Table 1. List of films and the themes that are the subject of this paper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common items</th>
<th>Set It Off</th>
<th>Tangerine</th>
<th>Moonlight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main LGBT+ character(s)</td>
<td>2 black lesbian women</td>
<td>2 black transgender women</td>
<td>Black gay man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stereotypes:</strong></td>
<td>2 black lesbian women</td>
<td>2 black transgender women</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Drugs</strong></td>
<td>Main characters use drugs.</td>
<td>Sex workers use drugs.</td>
<td>Main character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Violence</strong></td>
<td>Between police and the robbers.</td>
<td>Violence between sex workers</td>
<td>uses/deals it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low SES</strong></td>
<td>Main characters work in a cleaning company</td>
<td>Sex workers do not have regular income</td>
<td>Bullying at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Power relations:</strong></td>
<td>“Good” people are mainly white;</td>
<td>White police stops a fight between a</td>
<td>White supremacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White supremacy</strong></td>
<td>criminals are all black</td>
<td>White customer and a Black</td>
<td>cannot be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**Heterosexual</td>
<td>Lesbian relationship is only desire-based</td>
<td>transgender sex worker</td>
<td>considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>supremacy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>“You just went from half-fag to full-fag”.</td>
<td>in this film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**Representation of</td>
<td>Masculinity is represented as an</td>
<td>“All men cheat”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gender**</td>
<td>essential characteristic to human males.</td>
<td>“Real woman who has vagina.”</td>
<td>Rite of passage and masculinity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lesbian character is silenced</td>
<td></td>
<td>The “bad” single mother versus the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“good” woman savior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As stated in the table above the films will be analyzed in line with the following dimensions:

- Stereotypes including drugs, violence and low socioeconomic status
- Power relations including white and/or heterosexual supremacy
- Representation of gender

Since the three films share similarities in terms of these dimensions, they will be explored within the framework of common interconnected themes. The overall aim of the analysis is to explore the intersections between social status, race, gender, and sexuality by using the intersectionality approach. Besides, feminist film theory will be conducted in a way of analyzing representation of women, femininity, men and masculinity in films. Finally, since the thesis focuses on the experiences of sex, gender and race, it is worth noting that the directors of *Moonlight* and *Set It Off* are black men; while *Tangerine* has a white male director. Considering that most black filmmakers are raised in the white supremacist culture (hooks 1996, p. 71) the analysis will examine how this structure of domination influences films made by black filmmakers. On the other hand, the writing and filmmaking have been dominated by men through history, therefore a male point of view has been reflected in films (Smith 1972, p. 14). Accordingly, how male point of view has been reflected in the films will also be investigated.

3. Theoretical Framework

Various theoretical frameworks within feminist film theory and intersectionality will be conducted throughout the analysis. The main arguments have been drawn from the bell hook’s (2003) theory of *oppositional gaze* and Stuart Hall’s (2001) work on theorizing racial and ethnic difference and stereotypes in popular culture. The theoretical frameworks are described in details below.

a. Feminist film theory

The feminist film theory is influenced by the arguments of the second-wave feminism in the early 1970s. The main criticism revolved around the idea that the cinema’s reduction of the image of woman into stereotypes had not been discussed by the film history.
The sexist content of cinematic narrative had started to be criticized with the aim of changing the stereotypical image of women, which was considered expressing male fantasies. Accordingly, the feminist film theory approach emerged in Britain through the criticism of feminist scholars including Laura Mulvey\(^3\), Molly Haskell, Marjorie Rosen (p. 21). Since then, Hollywood cinema has been criticized as ideologically reflecting the patriarchal industry. Moreover, some women directors have been considered as imprisoned by its structure (Thornham 1997, p. 15). In the 1990s feminist film theory stated that cinema constructs meanings of sexual difference and sexuality rather than simply reflecting social relations, thus, started questioning ethnicity, masculinity, and queer sexualities (Smelik 1999, p. 2). In the following years, how intersectional the feminist film theory is becomes a question asked by black feminist writers who have been critical towards the theory offered by the white feminist scholars. In this regard, feminist film theory has started to engage with post-colonial theory, queer theory and postmodernism in the same era (p.ix). Accordingly, bell hooks coined a phrase ‘oppositional gaze’ in 1992. hooks’ work of feminist film theory criticizes the concept of male gaze developed by Laura Mulvey\(^4\). In US-American films, male gaze structures the audiences’ look which results in constitution of the male spectator as desiring the female, while the female is positioned as the object of his desire/gaze (Halberstam 2005, p. 139) For hooks (2003, p.204), developing the concept of oppositional gaze was a need since the black women spectators are not considered by the mainstream cinema. The oppositional gaze is relevant to the politics of race and racism and the oppression of minorities in cinema.

\(b\). bell hooks’ theoretical framework of \textit{oppositional gaze}:

hooks (2003) introduced a theoretical position that encourages Black women not to accept stereotypes in films but rather to critique them. The oppositional gaze was developed as a critique of male gaze. It theorizes the aspects of black female representation and spectatorship in films. For hooks, mainstream feminist film criticism, which privileges sexual difference, lacks a consideration for the possibility that women can construct an

\(^{3}\) Laura Mulvey has coined the term “male gaze.” Mulvey’s article \textit{Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema} has considered the single most anthologized essay in the field of feminist film theory (Thornham 1997, p. 40).

\(^{4}\) \textit{Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema} (1975)
oppositional gaze as a way of developing an understanding and awareness of the politics of race and racism (2003, p. 205). Since the feminist film theory is exclusive in that sense, the existence of black women within white supremacist culture becomes crucial for problematizing the issue of female identity, representation and spectatorship (hooks 2003, p.206). As hooks underlined (1990, p.171) it is a necessity to criticize the ‘cultural blindness’ in which people do not see whiteness represented as sign and symbol. In this regard, this paper draws on hooks’ theoretical framework in the way to interrogate black lesbian, black gay and black transgender representations in films with an aim of opposing the white, heterosexual, cisgender supremacy.

c. Stuart Hall’s theories on racial and ethnic difference and stereotypes in popular culture: Hall (1997) problematizes racial and ethnic difference and stereotypes in popular culture that have been reflected in the mass media. He argues ‘otherization’ of racial differences, and accordingly asks how people and places that are different from us are represented in popular culture. According to Hall (1997, p.239) Western ideas about race and images of racial difference are based on three major moments including slavery period, which had lasted three centuries, European colonization of Africa, and the post-World War II migrations from the ‘Third World’ into Europe and North America. In this regard, the current paper aims to investigate whether Hall’s arguments from two decades ago are still up to date in the current popular culture.

d. Intersectionality: Intersectionality was a knowledge project during the 1980s, when the phrase ‘race, class, and gender’ emerged as an umbrella term used by social justice movements (Collins 2015, p.9). There is not a singular definition of an intersectionality framework since there is a great deal of diversity in the way it is theorized and applied (Anthias 2013, p.125). Even though it holds on to the anti-racist feminism in the United States, the coinage of the term is attributed to Crenshaw (ibid.). That is to say intersectionality was not of value before Crenshaw discovered it (Collins 2015, p. 10). As Crenshaw (1991, p. 1244) already states it is “not being offered as some new, totalizing theory of identity.” As a matter of fact,
Patricia Hill Collins’ paradigms on gender, race and class was central to feminist theory and method before the term was coined (Anthias 2013, p.126; Bilge 2010, p.59). Collins (2015, p. 2) argues that the concept of intersectionality has a definitional fluidity. Nevertheless a general consensus defines it as an exclusive entities of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age that intersect. It aims to analyze ‘how specific kinds of power differentials and/or structurally constructed socio-cultural categorizations such as gender, ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, age/generation, dis/ability nationality, mother tongue interact and in so doing produce different kinds of societal inequalities and unjust social relations.’ (Lykke 2010, p. 50). Accordingly, the present paper aims to draw on intersectionality approach in order to analyze how unequal power relations between genders, races, classes and sexualities occur in films.

4. Previous Research

There is a considerable number of theoretical film criticisms associated with feminist politics and feminist theory. Yet, only few studies have explored black lgbti+ representations in the US-American films. The critiques by bell hooks, Kimberlé W. Crenshaw and Jack Halberstam have been inspiring in terms of exploring the intersections of class, race and gender. For instance, Halberstam (2005, p. 149) criticizes the film Austin Powers in terms of its representation of the black masculinity with racial stereotypes. Nevertheless in Austin Powers 2, white masculine failure is represented by the main character’s revealing of white masculinity as the ‘evil’ which is homoerotic and culturally derivative. Therefore the film offers masculine abjection which, for Halberstam, has borrowed from nonmale or penisless models of masculinity (p. 151). The films which attempt to reflect masculine abjection could be considered as progressive in the way of disrupting the constituted association between masculinity and dominance. Considering that challenging hegemonic masculinity in societies is not easy, this film plays an important role in filling the gap of a need for alternative masculine representations in the media. On the other hand, hooks (1994, pp. 55-56) criticizes The Bodyguard in terms of race, gender and class. The film is the first in the Hollywood history in terms of representing white male with a black female lover. Yet the black woman character is represented stereotypically oversexed. Moreover embedded message in the film is that the love between white and black individuals does not work regardless of how magical the relationship is represented (p.57). Similarly, the film Angel Heart relies on race-
sex exoticism by representing an African-American woman as having uncontrolled sexuality (Crenshaw 1993, p. 113). Aside from this, hooks (1990, pp. 155-156) argues that the film The Color Purple is directed by a liberal white filmmaker who exploited the culture of blackness. The film is considered as threatening in the way of not representing the white supremacist racist patriarch as an oppressor. On the other hand, she states that in films like Brother from Another Planet, Choose Me, Little Shop of Horrors black people are represented with negative stereotypes. Also, white directors represent black people as exciting characters that stimulate interest (p.157). Besides, some films like Do the Right Thing reinforce stereotypical tradition which portrays black males as villains (pp. 173-175). Moreover, hooks criticizes black filmmakers’ way of representing black images as well. Accordingly, she argues that the black filmmakers internalize the mentality of the oppressor, which results in the exploitation of the oppressed due to self-censorship and reluctance to speak about the reality (p. 157).

Nevertheless there is a research gap in the literature related to the intersectional analysis of the black lgbti+ representation in the US-American films. The purpose of the current study is to fill in the existing research literature and to contribute with a more comprehensive view at how black gay, lesbian and transsexual identities are represented in the films. It is necessary to focus on the representation of the oppressed subjects in films to come closer to an understanding of the extent to which the US-American films structure power relations between the social identities.

5. Methodology

The three films will be analyzed by using a qualitative research, semiotic methodology. Semiotics is a study of signs which is considered as a useful method for analyzing popular culture (Maasik & Solomon 1994). Roland Barthes applied semiotics to the interpretation of popular culture, and accordingly, established the political dimensions of semiotic analysis in 1950s. For Barthes, it is important to realize that the subject of a semiotic analysis, in a film for instance, is political even if it is not perceived as such. Cultural values and ideological positions are mostly perceived as facts or truths rather than as concepts that belong to systems from which they take their meaning. These systems of belief is called cultural mythologies within the semiotic analysis (p. 19). Semiotic analysis is a method of finding meanings in the way to relate things together. Polysemous is a term used for referring to the fact that cultural signs have more than one cause or explanation (p. 13).
In this regard, the analysis aims to investigate several explanations of the cultural signs represented in the films. Finally, the semiotics will be used in the current paper for interpreting the films’ texts. Also, narratives will be discussed by using semiotic methodology in order to bring polysemous and cultural mythologies in films to light.

6. Analysis: “Set It Off”, “Tangerine” and “Moonlight”

This chapter presents the analysis of the three films. Set It Off, Tangerine and Moonlight were chosen because the representation of black gay, lesbian and transgender characters in all three films have found to represent intersecting oppressions which are convenient to be analyzed with feminist film analysis and intersectionality. Besides, Set It Off is older than the other two films. The reason for choosing a film from the 1990s is to evaluate black heterogeneity in earlier times, since this period is known as a moment when black gays and black women found voice in films (Guerrero 1993). Each section is divided into sub-sections as follows: the plot; stereotypes including drugs, violence and low socioeconomic status; power relations including white and heterosexual supremacy; and the representation of gender.

6.1 SET IT OFF (1996)

6.1.1 The plot of Set It Off:

There are four black women characters in the film. Frankie works at the bank, her three best friends, Stoney, Cleo, and T.T. work at the Luther's Janitorial Services. The film starts with a robbery scene in the bank where Frankie works. Even though she has no connection with the incident, the bank fires her. On the other hand, her three friends are treated by their boss with disrespect. One day Cleo, who is the lesbian character in the film, offers her friends to rob a bank. The four women agree and do several robberies. Meanwhile Stoney meets Keith who works at the bank they are planning to rob. In this bank women fail to escape after the robbery and encounter with detective Strode and detective Waller. Shootout starts just after a bank security guard shoots T.T., then the four women succeed to run away, however, T.T. dies in the car. They decide to split up since the police drive them into a corner. Cleo and Frankie are shot down by the police. Meanwhile detective Strode sees Stoney at the bus but lets her go since he is the one who caused her brother and friends to be killed.
6.1.2: Stereotypes including drugs, violence and low socioeconomic status in Set It Off

Drugs:

The film reinforces the perception of ‘all black people are drug abusers’ by offering a ‘black drug user’ stereotype. In one of the scenes four black women characters are represented as smoking weed on the roof of a house. Stereotyped image of blacks, women and gays in the mass media and in everyday speech is not something new (Dyer 2000, p. 245). According to Hall (2001, p.257) stereotyping has essential, reductionist, naturalizing effects which has a central role in representation of racial difference. Hall calls such representational practice “racialized regime of representation.” It excludes the images which do not fit into ‘us’ thus it creates ‘them.’ Accordingly excluded groups become ‘abjected’, in other words ‘thrown out’ (Kristeva 1982, cited in Hall 2001, p. 258). This exclusion is visibly represented in Set It Off, which portrays black characters as criminal drug users. As a consequence, constructed association between black people and drug use both reinforces the very idea that black people always commit drug crimes and maintains prejudice and discrimination against African-Americans. Welch (2007, p. 283) calls this strategy of exclusion in media as “modern racism.” In a similar way, hooks (1995, p. 187) states that the nature of racist oppression and exploitation has shifted from slavery to white supremacy in the modern world. hooks (1996, pp. 186-187) describes the term white supremacy as a racial hierarchy, which does not involve force like in slavery, yet it still informs the social status of black people.

For much of the history African-Americans have been represented by stereotypical roles in the US-American films. The origin of stereotypical representations of black people in films cannot be understood without considering what happened in the past with drugs in everyday life in America. In the 1980s the United States government's campaign called war on drugs which aimed to eliminate the drug trade played a key role in typification of criminals as black (Welch 2007, p.279). Crack was then an inexpensive drug which was mostly used and sold by impoverished racial minorities. The sale and use of crack cocaine were criminalized by heavier penalties than other drugs, which have been used mostly by white population (ibid.). That is to say, the war on drugs has created a public belief that the arrest rate of black drug offenders is higher than that of white drug offenders. In reality, whites commit more drug crimes than blacks, yet, because the campaign was targeting black drug offenders, racial disparities have been constructed (Human Rights Watch 2000). As a result black people have been associated with drug use and drug use has been
associated with black people (Welch 2007, p. 280). However racial/ethnic comparison statistics demonstrate that African-American college students have lower usage rates than white peers for most drugs in the 1990s (Johnston 2010, p. 28). Moreover, contrary to the cultural myth, in a longitudinal study African-American population was found to have lower rates of using drugs than white population during their life time since 1975 (Johnston et al. 2012, p. 45). Also, recent findings of the national survey on drug use and health show that the percentage of white Americans having drugs are higher than black Americans’ (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2016).

Violence:

Physical violence between police and robbers is represented throughout the film. The scene in which violence is represented raises the question of violent stereotypes that are attached to the images of black people. Throughout the film, audience is to believe that black people are violent as it has been historically depicted in the mass media. In the very beginning of the film a white woman bank customer is killed by a black man burglar brutally. The embedded message here is that black people do violence. Especially black men are portrayed as scary and masculine criminals. As hooks (1990, p.173) argues, mass media representation of race is exploited in various ways, including angry black people engaging in violence, and someone is killed. According to hooks, the following scenes mostly represent a white male hero who is going to do next. In parallel with what hooks argues, Set It Off represents white male policemen as heroes who kill black criminals. In scenes where black people are murdered by policemen raise questions about whether such representations imply police brutality or powerlessness of black people. The answer is probably the both. hooks (1990, p.176) argues that such scenes deliver a powerful message in a white supremacist society by offering the white supremacist system of policing and control as intact while on the other hand showing black people as powerless to assert any meaningful resistance.

The violent scenes in the film can be best understood through mutually constructing categories that shape the meaning of power. Race and gender seem relational in these violent scenes. This is evident in the scene where the white woman bank customer is killed by a black man burglar brutally. Here, the social inequality is constructed between the categories of the woman and the
man, as well as between the categories of the white and the black. Similar power relations are
represented in another violent scene where white male police officer uses violence towards black
women burglars. Yet there is an essential difference between those two scenes: The former is
potentially provoking audiences towards the black man, the latter is likely to bring along an idea
that what the white man did was fair and his treatment was legitimate.

Towards the end of the film four black women fail to rob a bank; they encounter with two police
officers before they escape. Meanwhile the white male police officer starts to talk and attempts to
persuade them to surrender their weapons. Cleo becomes the first who takes out her mask with
anger and says: “No!” On the other hand other women next to Cleo get sad and put their weapons
slowly down along with their masks with sad and almost crying faces. All of a sudden a bank
security who is a white man shows up and kills one of the women. Then Cleo opens fire on the
police officers and kills the bank security brutally. Nevertheless she does not surprise audiences
with her acts which break the stereotypical representation of women because she already represents
unusual behaviors throughout the film. The reason behind the representation of Cleo’s distinctive
behavior could be explained by the consideration of her lesbian identity as unusual, deviant or
‘wrong’. Since her black lesbian identity is associated with behaviors such as being aggressive,
she is likely to be coded on the audiences’ eyes as the other among the women representations in
the film. In the aforementioned scene above, Stoney, Frankie and T.T.’s reactions reflect what
exactly women are expected to perform. While they are represented as docile and submissive
towards the police officer’s talk, Cleo is represented as the only woman character who
withstands the police. Nevertheless the unusual characteristics of the black lesbian identity in the film raise the
question of whether this distinction is made in favor of or against a person based on race and
sexuality. If Cleo’s representation is read as a critique of membership in race and sexuality then
the boundaries of being black and lesbian become questionable in the film.

Low Socioeconomic Status:

hooks (1995, pp. 255-256) argues that media representations of the ruling class result in making
the underprivileged black people’s live more painful and harder due to the internalizing of the
mindset which idealizes values of the bourgeois. In the beginning of the film, the three friends are
represented as workers in a cleaning company, then Frankie starts to work in the same company
after she got fired from the bank. It could be argued that an idea voiced in the film is that black people are mostly from lower class. On the other hand, workers and customers at the bank and police officers are mainly white people. The four friends are associated with negative stereotypes of laziness and dishonesty. It is common in popular culture to see the poor as equated with worthlessness (hooks 1994, p.168). Poor people are represented as the ones who are willing to be rich, thus, they commit all manner of dehumanizing and brutal acts for material gain (ibid.). As is the case in Set It Off, the four friends see themselves as worthless and powerless due to their social class. As hooks (1994, p.169) suggests, the only way to escape from the image of a life that is valueless is to escape from poverty. Thus, we see the four characters in the film as committing a bank robbery. Interestingly, the audience do not see how they use the stolen money, rather the film represents the four character as happy and proud for possessing the material of money itself. That is to say, possessing the money holds a symbolic meaning, which refers to a shift from lower class to upper class. The very money itself becomes a tool to avoid from the identification of poor, and accordingly leads to the sense of self-worthiness.

6.1.3: Power relations including white and/or heterosexual supremacy

“Good” people are mainly white; criminals are all black:

Workers and customers at the bank and police officers are mainly white who are represented as good and decent people. Frankie is the only black person who works at the bank, yet she got fired by her boss who is a white man. Then she agrees with her friends’ ideas to rob a bank. In the following scenes we see Frankie as a burglar with other three black women. Furthermore, in the very beginning of the film burglars are represented as violent black males. The film racializes a crime by offering a stereotype of ‘black men commit more crime.’ It is the fact that black men are usually represented as villains in films (hooks 1990, p. 173). This tradition is reinforced in Set It Off. Considering hooks’ (1996, pp. 186-187) statement of the white supremacy is a racial hierarchy, the stereotypical media representations inspire us to think about how racial hierarchy is reproduced in films intentionally or unintentionally. Halberstam (2005, pp. 125-126) gives an important example of the crimes happened in America back in the 1990s and raises a question of the forms of white masculinity which have been encouraged and cultivated in the society. Hate crimes towards gay, lesbian, and transgender people by white boys in this period of time used to be evaluated by the mainstream media as a matter of gun control, violence in video games, and the
breakdown in the family. Very few critics used to interrogate the construction of adolescent white hetero-masculinity itself. According to Halberstam, this was a strategy to avoid any attribution of white boys or white men to the violent crimes. As it was mainly the case in 1990s America, the film *Set It Off* does not motivate audience to have a critical look at the racial hierarchy. Accordingly, white hetero-masculinity is represented as a symbol of the ‘good’, therefore, white men are not associated with the causes of violent crimes. It could be argued that the representation of black and lesbian identity of Cleo and her girlfriend is associated with this understanding of white supremacy. Since the white identity is identified as good, all the white characters in the film represent the norm. Yet the black characters become a symbol of inaccuracy due to their acts including being criminals. Nevertheless Cleo is not represented in the same way with her friends who express wide range of emotions throughout the film. For instance, the four women are represented as expressing self-weaknesses, fear, sadness including crying as well as happiness at different times, while Cleo’s expressions mainly reflect her self-reliance. One of the different representations between Cleo and other women can be noticed in a scene where all of them practice shooting in a polygon. Stoney and Frankie are represented as using a gun properly yet T.T. is shown as failing to even grab a gun. On the other hand Cleo uses not only one but two guns at the same time. Here the two extreme examples are displayed: Cleo who is a lesbian representation and T.T. who is a mother representation are polar opposites. Being a lesbian is associated with being divergent while being a mother is equated to incapability. Besides, Stoney and Frankie display ideal examples within the inaccuracy they all belong to.

Cleo’s lesbian identity is overlapped with her black identity in which the mainstream viewers perceive her ‘inaccurate’ acts as resulted from her exclusion from the category of white and heterosexual. In this regard the film not only represents hierarchical dominance of heterosexuality but also of the white identity. The representation of Cleo exemplifies the unequal power relations of the social identities in which her black identity justifies her lesbian identity to a certain degree. In other words, Cleo’s black identity offers the audience to perceive her lesbian identity not as surprising since the both identities are marginalized. Thus, their overlap becomes natural to the eye of the mainstream audience.
Lesbian character being silenced:

Ursula is a black lesbian character in the film who is represented in a few scenes only as an erotic object. Her objectified feminine gender performance is constituted as an object of the male-dominated gaze. She is Cleo’s mute girlfriend who does not speak at all throughout the film. She is represented in scenes while kissing and dancing over Cleo. That way Ursula and Cleo’s lesbian relationship is represented solely as desire-based in which the audience do only see them representing butch femme eroticism. Furthermore, by showing negative reactions of Cleo’s friends at the beginning of the film when Cleo and Ursula kiss, the film offers an idea that the lesbian relationship is not legitimate. Even though Cleo’s friends are not represented as horribly homophobic, they are represented as uncomfortable and seems that they are disclaiming their lesbian relationship in scenes where Cleo and Ursula are represented together. On the other hand, heterosexual relationship between Stoney and Keith is including more feelings than just sexual intimacy. It is an intimate relationship that legitimates itself by representing the romantic background behind it. In this regard, the film follows the usual Hollywood romantic setup. In other words it is evident that black people embodied the values of white supremacy. hooks (1996, p. 186) argues that it is important to recognize the fact in which black people can exercise ‘white supremacist control’ over other black people. In the film, legitimization of the romantic relationship between Stoney and Keith, and, accordingly, three women’s disclaim of their friend’s lesbian relationship can be read as an exercise of power over one another, as hooks suggests, which is a result of a perpetuation of the white supremacist beliefs.

This oppression based on sexuality reflects the traditional sexual value system explained in Rubin’s (1984) text. According to the system, ‘good’, ‘normal’, and ‘natural’ sexuality should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous and reproductive. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is bad, abnormal, or unnatural (Rubin 1984, p. 154). In Set It Off, in contrast with Cleo and her girlfriend, Stoney and Keith are in a heterosexual relationship which is adaptable to the norms, thus their sexual identities are appropriate for the category of normal.

The film represents Stoney and Keith’s first meeting, their first date and after a while their sexual relationship step by step. According to Butler (1993, p.126), heterosexual privilege operates itself
through naturalizing and rendering itself as the original and the norm. In Set It Off, viewers are to believe that sexual practices other than heterosexuality are not proper. Moreover, Butler (1993, p.126) argues that homophobia and homosexual panic are negotiated in films in order to police the boundaries of heterosexuality. It could be argued that the representation of lesbian relationship in Set It Off does not hold an aim to demonstrate the existence and the possibility of queerness. Rather, the film attempts to portray lesbian relationship as valueless and thus becomes illegitimate in the public eye.

An attempt to privilege heterosexuality in films and maintain the heterosexual supremacy in societies has its origins in the 1990s. During this period some films aimed to represent the cultural myth of ‘heterosexual awakening’ which refers to an experience of an awakening of children regarding their sexuality during pubescence (Dennis 2009, p.69). Those films were representing heterosexuality as a natural and inevitable outcome of biological maturation (Dennis 2009, p.61), which requires a stigmatization of alternate sexualities as ‘abnormal, unnatural and sinful’ (Collins 2004 p. 97). On the other hand, Set It Off breaks the praxis of the invisibility of the butch lesbian that is rarely represented in the mainstream media. The reason of the invisibility can be explained with the male gaze. Filmmakers do not prefer to represent the butch, because unlike the femme, it is not consumable while the femme is overrepresented due to its attractiveness and desirability in the mainstream media (Ciasullo 2001, p. 339). As a result, women are objectified by the active gaze of the men.

6.1.4: The representation of gender

Female masculinity is a reality:

Masculinity is implied as an essential characteristic to men in the film. In two scenes the boss of the women workers at the cleaning company is represented while calling them as follows: “Good morning ladies…” stops for a while, then stares at Cleo, continues: “…and a gentleman.” This is a way of showing the perceptions on masculinity as if it is an essential characteristic to human

5 Little Monsters (1989); All I Want for Christmas (1991); Jungle 2 Jungle (1997); Un indien dans la ville (1994).
6 Ciasullo (2001, p. 341) uses the term “luscious lesbians” to refer to a kind of lesbian representation which targets a straight male audience.
males. Female masculinities are rejected in order to maintain the borders of male masculinity and to establish it as the real thing (Halberstam 1998, p.1).

When the boss calls Cleo gentleman, Cleo seems uncomfortable to be called so. As Halberstam (1998, pp. 21-29) suggests, a person who is identified as butch -Cleo in the film- might considers herself not to be woman but maintains distance from the category man. Moreover female masculinity is not a female version of male masculinity. There is another dimension of this discussion worth to be considered. What if the person was assigned male at birth and being called as a “lady”? Presumably, the outcome would not be the same, because it is obvious that “not to look like a woman” is easier in comparison with “not to look like a man” which is a serious threat for manhood (Halberstam 1998, p.28). On the other hand, female masculinity becomes at its most threatening when coupled with lesbian identity (ibid.).

In the film, female masculinity is not celebrated because the representation of Cleo does not reflect a critical stance against the idea that it is an imitation of manhood. Even though it seems Cleo’s representation expands the definitions of femininity-masculinity, it fails to contradict mainstream media’s traditional negative stereotypes of sexual minorities. The similar stereotyping is exemplified by Hall (1997) through a sports context where black women athletes were represented in pictures as ones who ‘look like a man.’ In this representation, women were not only stigmatized based on their masculine gender performance, but also removed from the category of woman.

Ciasullo (2001, pp.337-341) stated that in the 1990s, lesbian characters in films were mainly middle class white femme women. On the other hand, only two mainstream films represented lesbian women in color7. Ciasullo evaluates Cleo’s sexuality and gender performance in Set It Off. According to Ciasullo, the stereotypical white lesbian image was altered by Cleo’s representation. Yet on the other hand, her femme girlfriend is portrayed with blonde hair which could be read as an attempt to ‘whiten’ her. In an interesting interview, hooks (1994, p. 127) asks American rapper and actor Ice Cube about his experiences as a black person in the media, he states that the dominant

7Jane in Boys on the Side (1994) and Set It Off (1996).
white images in the mainstream media in the 1990s made black people want to change their hair, eyes and features. Nevertheless, in the film, the representation of Cleo’s femme girlfriend changes the mythology about black women in which black lesbian women are no way considered as femme. When we look at the historical background of the butch-femme discussions within lesbian communities it becomes obvious that the media representations of lesbian characters evolved in parallel with the political discussions. As Roof (1998, pp. 27-29) states, butch-femme was mainly rejected in the 1960s and 1970s by a new generation of young lesbians who believed in a binary gender system. In the 1990s, which was a time when sex disentangled from gender, butch-femme was recognized as a political possibility.

*Masculinity as a sign of power:*

The detective police officer Strode represents hegemonic masculinity in the film. In the beginning of the film he is represented while shouting to Frankie during the interrogation. Besides the physical power and psychological violence, economic power relations are represented between Frankie and her boss in following scenes. In the beginning of the film, the boss in the bank thinks that Frankie is in a collusion with the men who did robbery, which was actually not the case. Besides the power relations between social classes, the film constructs racialized power that represents powerful masculine presence in black men. In this regard, it is reasonable to argue that white men are represented as superior to black men in terms of social class. Black men are represented as more muscular and seem more masculine and, consequently, more physically powerful than the white male characters in the film. As hooks (1990, p. 69) states, Hollywood portrays black masculinity conventionally as brutish and animalistic.

The film ratifies a norm in which masculinity equites power. Besides, it constructs power relations based on gender and race. All men are represented as masculine and inevitably powerful, either in terms of social class or physical state. White policemen and the white boss of Frankie, for instance, are portrayed in high social positions. Moreover while detective Strode is represented as the main character who provides security, his female colleague detective Waller talks very little throughout the film even though she is represented equally with her male colleague. On the other hand, black burglars in the beginning of the film are represented as superior muscular men. Moreover, Keith - Stoney’s black boyfriend- is represented as socially superior to Stoney. He has a good position in the bank, yet Stoney works in the cleaning company that pays a low salary. The social class
difference between the two is obvious in one scene where they decide to go to a cocktail party organized by bankers. Before going there they stop on their way to buy a more elegant dress for Stoney, since Keith does not find her dress proper enough. This scene reflects how class positionality shapes individuals’ perspectives and standpoints (hooks 1995, p.174). Finally, we see power relations between the four women and their male boss. Here, the power that is attributed to the man is not racialized because he is also black like his workers. Instead, an oppression based on gender is represented.

**Summary**

The film uses various stereotypical representations including black people as drug users and criminals; black men as violent; poor people as lazy; white people in superior social positions; lesbian people as those who are only interested in sexual intimacy. Even though the film is directed by African-American filmmaker Felix Gary Gray, the narrative form of the film does not challenge the traditional stereotypical images of race, gender, sexuality and class. Tension between black and white people is represented throughout the film. As a matter of fact, white people are represented as having superior skills throughout the film, while black people are portrayed as failed at the end. hooks (1996, p. 74) argues that the existence of black characters in films does not necessarily stand for undermining racism. When the film is evaluated based on its portrayals of the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality experiences, it becomes reasonable to argue that black, poor, femme and butch lesbian identities are mutually subordinated and minoritized. The intersecting oppressions can be seen in scenes where black people are merely shown as poor and weak. In a similar way black lesbian characters who are subordinated to black heterosexual supremacy disclose the fact that hierarchical relations are constituted between the oppressed groups on the basis of gender and sexuality. On the other hand, considering that the film was shot in the 1990s when black heterogeneity started to be represented in films (Guerrero 1993), the black lesbian representations in *Set It Off* could be celebrated in a sense of visibility.

**6.2 TANGERINE (2015)**

**6.2.1 The plot of Tangerine:**

The film begins with a conversation between two black transgender women sex workers at a donut
shop. Sin-Dee hears from her closest friend Alexandra that her boyfriend Chester cheated on her with a cisgender woman. Sin-Dee starts searching for both Chester and the cisgender woman named Dinah. Meanwhile, Alexandra is busy with handing out flyers of her musical performance on the streets. After a while Sin-Dee finds Dinah at a brothel. Dinah is a white cisgender sex worker. Sin-Dee commits violence towards her. Now Sin-Dee aims to come up against Chester, thus she drags Dinah with her. They stop on their way to watch Alexandra's performance, which happens in a mostly empty bar. Sin-Dee and Dinah smoke crystal meth in the bathroom of the bar. After that, Sin-Dee, Alexandra and Dinah go to the donut shop and confront Chester. Meanwhile Chester tells them that he slept with Sin-Dee’s best friend Alexandra as well. Afterwards Sin-Dee leaves and Alexandra follows her. Sin-Dee avoids talking, rather tries to pick up clients. However she faced with transphobia from a group of men, which makes the two friends closer again.

6.2.2: Stereotypes including drugs, violence and low socioeconomic status in Tangerine

Drugs:

Sin-Dee is a black transgender sex worker in the film who is represented as using drugs. Towards the end of the film the audience understand that Sin-Dee was in prison for 28 days since she got caught with cocaine. Her boyfriend Chester is a drug dealer who causes her to be arrested. In one of the scenes we see Sin-Dee looking for Chester in the streets after her release from prison. Meanwhile she come across with a black transgender sex worker who offers her to smoke weed after Sin-Dee explains that Chester cheated on her. In the following scenes Sin-Dee and Dinah are seen in the bathroom while they smoke crystal meth. In those scenes the intersecting categories of gender, race and class structure a stereotypical situation in which the lives of transgender black sex workers are represented miserable and dramatic. The embedded message here is that they use drugs in order to feel relieved. Nevertheless the film not only represents black transgender sex workers as using drugs, but also represents white cisgender sex worker Dinah and Sin-Dee’s white boyfriend Chester while using drugs. Therefore drugs are basically associated with lower class in the film. On the other hand, mainstream audiences are likely to selectively perceive Sin-Dee as a black transgender who is lazy and insufficient to work in a ‘proper job.’ Therefore, being black transgender, which is associated with lower class, is considered as a reason to sell drugs and do sex work because this perception is what hegemonic white heterosexual and cisgender supremacy expects to see. In other words, representation of the black transgender sex worker as using drugs is
likely to construct a multiple jeopardy in which the intersections of the white, heterosexual, and cisgender supremacy hold oppressive forces over it. Even though stereotyping is a staple mechanism of racism (Barker 1999, p. 75) such representations in films do not necessarily mean that the filmmaker targets provoking racism in society. After all, in *Tangerine*, not only black people but also white people are represented as drug users. Besides, perceptions differ from one audience to another when it comes to the representation of drugs because ideas on drug use and the degree of the prejudice against people who use drugs are variant. As a consequence it could be argued that the drug stereotypes in *Tangerine* might not necessarily support racist, sexist or transphobic beliefs, but it can rather be questioned to what extent it reinforces the association between the oppressed social identities and drugs.

*Violence:*

In *Tangerine*, four forms of violence are represented throughout the film, which are institutional violence, economic violence, emotional violence and physical violence. In one of the scenes we see Alexandra arguing with her customer who is a white man who refuses to pay her. This scene represents economic violence between the white man and the black woman. The customer’s refusal to pay reflects the fact that sex workers experience emotional and economic violence at work. Moreover, the film represents physical violence when Alexandra and the customer start scuffling after Alexandra’s threatening words: “You forgot I have a dick too.” Here, the specific physical feature is attributed to physical power. This essentialist representation reinforces transmisogyny, which is represented in the form of internalized transmisogyny in the film. In other words, Alexandra represents internalized discrimination against transgender people and women by considering that being female is inferior to maleness (Serano 2012). After a while, we see two white police officers in a car. A policeman is talking to a policewoman about his date in a sexist way. A girl in his story is considered as “classy” by the police woman. Meanwhile they both see the fight between Alexandra and the man in front of their car. Police woman uses the word “classy” ironically while watching the fight as she aforementioned it for identifying the good and attractive woman in the story. Then she asks whether her colleague knows Alexandra. They remain seated in the car until the fight become very close to them. Finally, the white woman police officer gets out of the car and breaks up the fight. We realize that the police officer knows Alexandra from previous incidences, which shows the audience that Alexandra is a troublemaker who encounters
with police all the time. What we see in this scene is a physically powerful black transgender woman who starts trouble and commits physical harm to the white character. Nevertheless the film offers a progressive representation in the way of displaying a critical stance towards institutional violence. That is to say, the police officers are not represented as heroic as was the case in Set It Off. Rather, the police officers in Tangerine are represented as sexist which is likely to turn out that policing could also be subjected to criticism in the mass media.

In another scene, we see two women sex workers; Sin-Dee and Dinah. After hearing that her boyfriend had an affair with Dinah, Sin-Dee finds her and commits violence towards her. Instead of calling it a fight between two women sex workers, it could be more appropriate to read it as a maltreatment of a white cisgender woman. Similarly with the aforementioned scene above, the black transgender woman is the one who starts trouble and the white character gets harm. Even though power is usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group (Hall 2001, p. 258) this scene represents black characters in heroic figures who have superior physical power than the white characters. Parallel with the shift in US-American cinema in the 1970s (Heiling 2009) stereotypical portrayal of black people in Tangerine is reflecting heroic figures rather than passive roles. That is to say, Black characters are represented in a stereotypical way who are physically more powerful than white people. Furthermore, the extended scenes which represent violence between Sin-Dee and Dinah last unnecessarily long, which can easily become irritating to watch. Considering this, the film reinforces violence using repeating clashes between the characters. hooks (1994, p. 120) argues that violence and rage in some films are portrayed uncritically which leads to the conclusion that it is natural and/or is a way of expression. Moreover, if the audiences see the reason behind this act it becomes more easily acceptable. It could be argued that the violence scenes in Tangerine are represented uncritically as if violence is part of entertainment. Moreover, the film shows the reason of the violent act and suggests that Sindee’s aggression is an expression of jealousy, similarly Alexandra gets aggressive since she is not getting paid by the customer.

The violent scenes raise the question of whether the reality needs to be represented directly or symbolically in films. Considering that the films reflect social reality (Thornham 1997, p. 14) the way of representing reality becomes questionable. If the films shape cultural attitudes and individuals’ ideas in a given society, then the direct representation of violence –as a social reality–
plays an important role in reinforcing and reproducing the perceptions on violence which is likely to lead the normalization of violent behavior. Reflecting the very reality in films is likely to serve for a fixation of the stereotypes, which might result in the maintenance of the status quo. As it can be seen in the aforementioned scenes, violence which is explicitly represented in the film reconstructs power relations. That is not to say violence should not be reflected in films either to ignore its social reality. What matters most is how it is represented. In this regard, Tangerine is problematic in the way of representing violence that turns a subject of violence into an objectified image.

Low socioeconomic status:

Racial difference and transgender identity are signified through the identification of social class in Tangerine. Sin-Dee and Alexandra are sex workers who do not have regular incomes and sometimes experience tensions with clients due to their refusal to pay or their transphobic attitudes. We see they use buses, eat cheap donuts. In one of the scenes we see Sin-Dee jumps over the ticket barriers and does not pay for the metro. Yet the audience is likely to enjoy such scenes since the life of the working poor is represented with humor. Negative representation of the poor is consisted of the fear of the possibility in which the poor might assume their role as exploited workers and/or they might not seek to work if poverty is deemed acceptable (hooks 1994, p.170). Thus, the representation of the poor is limited by the assumption that to be poor means that one is not hardworking (hooks 1994, p.171). Therefore, throughout the film, mainstream audience might believe that black people and/or sex workers are lazy people who do not seek a “proper job” to work. Associating blackness with the under-class is not something new (hooks 1994, p. 147).

On the other hand, Alexandra is represented as paying the bar to let them perform there rather than being paid by them. This scene could be read as Alexandra’s effort to improve her situation. However she faces with white supremacy at the workplace. The bar’s exploitation of labor is connected with the intersections of oppression based on race, gender and sexuality. Even though the film does not show directly why Alexandra is not paid for performing in the bar, the embedded message in this scene is that transgender individuals cannot find a job easily due to bias and cisgender privilege. However this understanding might lead to the cultural myth that the sex work is always the ‘only option’ for transgender people, which inhibits to think sex work as work. As is
the case in the film, sex work is likely to be seen as a way of making easy money. Nevertheless, the film could be read affirmative in the way of representing problems faced by sex workers. Ultimately, there is a need for more media representations in which sex work is represented as a personal choice and sex workers are displayed like any other member of the working class.

6.2.3: Power relations including white and/or heterosexual supremacy

White Supremacy:

Two police officers represented in the film are white cisgender individuals. Also, the owner/boss of the bar in which Alexandra performs is a white cisgender man. On the one hand white characters are represented as wealthy people who have superior social positions; on the other hand black people are represented as broke. That way black and white characters represent opposite poles. As Hall (2001) cited from Derrida (1974), the concept of the binary oppositions is clearly visible in this film. As Derrida argued, a relation of power exists between the poles in which one pole of the binary is usually the dominant one (Hall 2001, p. 235). An idea voiced in this film is that black and white people are different from each other in various ways. First of all, white people are superior in terms of their social class: they are represented as police officers, owner/boss of the bar, and customer of the black sex worker. Secondly, black transgender women are more powerful than white people in terms of their physical characteristics: black transgender women are represented while using physical power towards a white sex worker and a white customer. By constructing the binary oppositions, the film reinforces the idea of racial separatism. According to hooks (1990, p.175) racial separatism is defended even by those who do not publicly articulate it. Moreover, the reason behind this stance is mostly due to the white people’s fear that black people’s presence will cause violence (ibid.).

Heterosexual supremacy:

In one of the scenes, Chester says he is Sin-Dee’s fiancé and soon they will get married. Soon after Dinah reacts to Chester as follows: “You just went from half-fag to full-fag”, then she laughs. Here, the homophobic discourse implies that an oppressed subject does not necessarily approach another oppressed subject in an empathetic manner. That is to say, once the subjects feel comfortable in their own comfort zone, they can become oppressors. Hall (2001, p. 258) argues that power is
usually directed against the excluded group. In this film, Dinah is a cisgender and heterosexual woman who uses its privilege to humiliate Chester who is in her perspective not heterosexual. By using the word fag, Dinah is pointing that Sin-Dee is not cisgender, moreover her statement also embodies transphobia in the way of discriminating and excluding Sin-Dee from the category of woman.

6.2.4: The representation of gender

The limits of the category of woman:

In the very beginning of the film, Alexandra tells Sin-Dee that Chester cheated on her with a ‘real woman who has vagina.’ When Sin-Dee asks who she was, Alexandra replies as: “She is some white fish.” Sin-Dee gets surprised and asks if she was a “real fish.” The answer of Alexandra is: “Yes, real girl with vagina and everything.” This scene represents the cultural myths of the category of woman. In this conversation, the condition of being a woman is equated with having a vagina and being white. Attributing womanhood to biological characteristics not only reduces women to the biological essence but also gives a way to the exclusion of transgender and black women from the category of woman. This conversation also displays transgender women’s internalized transphobia which could be read in this film as a set of essentialist beliefs transgender people adopt unconsciously as a result of an exposure to the traditional definition of womanhood existed in the society.

Constructing biology as a determining factor leads to a legitimization of social and cultural inequality between genders, races, ethnicities, classes, cultures nations, language, sexualities, dis/abilities, ages and so on (Lykke 2010). The exclusion based on gender is closely related with other social oppression which has the basis of race. As Collins (2015, p. 14) argues, social oppressions are best understood in relational terms since the very categories shape intersecting systems of power. To put it in a different way, “the question of who and what is considered real and true is apparently a question of knowledge and power” (Butler 2004, p. 27).

In the film, we see that the power relations of racism and sexism are interrelated. Similar with cisgender-transgender binary opposition, white and black women representations reflect binary opposition in the media. There is a stereotypical conception of black women which defines them
as less feminine in comparison with some mythic norm of white femininity (Halberstam 1998, p. 29). Accordingly, Tangerine represents the exclusion of black women from the category of woman. This can be seen in an aforementioned scene where Alexandra points that the girl who is in a relationship with Chester is a ‘white fish.’ It is evident that Alexandra does not place her black transgender woman identity into the category of women which, for her, refers to white cisgender womanhood. The unequal relations pertaining to gender and race that intersect with one another assign her identity as the excluded other. On the other hand, it is not surprising that the white cisgender heterosexual supremacist system inevitably assimilates our ideas with the definition in which white cisgender womanhood is considered as the norm. In this regard, the two black transgender characters’ statements could be read as an internalized white heterosexist cultural gaze. hooks (1991, p. 215) argues that the dominant heterosexist culture regards transgender as crossing over from a realm of power into a realm of powerlessness. Thus, it could be argued that the two transgender characters adopt the cultural myths in order to feel included into the culture. Considering their statements the two transgender characters seem signify themselves as the other, because they have different characteristics from what is assigned to white cisgender women. As Hall (2001, p. 229) argues, ‘them’ rather than ‘us’ is reflected since they feel that they are significantly different from the majority. At the same time we can also read this scene as progressive since they open up new possibilities to the traditional definition of womanhood. As Halberstam (2005, p. 76) put well, transgender body is a symbol of excellence for both flexibility and rigidity, an insistence on particular forms of recognition.

Men are polygamous, women are monogamous:

Chester is represented as insensitive in his romantic relationships and as the one who engages freely in promiscuous sex. On the other hand, Sin-Dee is represented as sensitive and as the one who is monogamous-oriented. She expects Chester’s commitment in their romantic relationship. When Sin-Dee hears that Chester cheated on her, Alexandra consoles her as follows: “All men cheat”. That way, different gender performances and sexual practices between men and women which are largely accepted by many cultures are legitimimized. One can claim that men have basic inherent characteristics such as cheating, yet all behaviors are learned and reflect the cultural values.
In another scene, Sin-Dee, Dinah and Alexandra start arguing concerning the cheating case. Soon after Chester thinks it is “a girl thing” and leaves until they “fix up”. This sexist comment represents essentialist view similar with the aforementioned discourse on the “real woman”. Here, characters are divided in two as men and women. That way women are disdained and considered as those who always argue among each other concerning their boyfriend issues. This scene raises the question of whether in some situations the transgender women are considered real women and in others not. In Tangerine, both cases take place: in two different scenes we see Dinah put a fag label on Chester in which she actually excludes Sin-Dee from a category of woman. Similarly, Sin-Dee and Alexandra exclude themselves from the category of woman by calling Dinah as a “real woman”. In contrast, when Chester thinks the discussions of a cheating issue is “a girl thing”, all of them – Sin-Dee, Alexandra and Dinah– conform this stereotype.

According to Barker (1999, p. 92) in some cases people act as if gendered categories are essential due to political reasons which is what Spivak calls strategic essentialism. If we read those scenes with this definition, it becomes reasonable to conclude that Sin-Dee and Alexandra include themselves into the category of woman and in turn adapt the essential characteristics strategically in order to maintain their group identity. In another scene, Chester asks a married man –who is interested in Sin-Dee– whether he considers his own interest to Sin-Dee as cheat or not. The man replies as: “I pay for it, it is not like we are getting married.” Such sexist scenes throughout the film raise the question of whether the representation of sexism reinforces or interrogates sexist beliefs in general.

Summary

Tangerine is the only film in this thesis which has a white male American director. Sean Baker states that his aim to make this film was to represent an unofficial red light district of Los Angeles (Watercutter 2015). Moreover the film breaks the tradition of cisgender performers playing transgender roles. In this regard, the film holds an important positive aspect in terms of representing two transgender characters played by transgender individuals themselves. On the other hand, bell hooks questions the representation of blackness from the standpoint of whiteness in films. For hooks (1991, p.218) it is important to question how much the film interrogates and/or celebrates whiteness more than to question who directs it. In a similar way, how much the film interrogates
white cisgender heterosexual supremacy and/or celebrates black transgender sex workers is one of the key questions to be asked concerning this film. In order to evaluate the question of the representation of the oppressed, to what degree the film represents real experiences of the oppressed needs to be addressed. Sean Baker stated that he had decided to have transgender individuals play in the film as a result of interaction with his trans advocate friends (Watercutter 2015). Considering this statement along with the fact that the film represents real experiences of transgender sex workers living in Los Angeles, it could be argued that the social identities of Sean Baker do not necessarily determine the quality of the film he made. *Tangerine* plays an important role in filling the gap in cinema by telling the story of black transgender sex workers. Moreover, the film breaks the tradition of the United States in which, as Collins (2002, p.284) states, ‘hegemonic ideologies concerning race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation are often so pervasive that it is difficult to conceptualize alternatives to them.’ To conclude, *Tangerine* is an independent film that reflects critical cultural representations of the oppressed and of the supremacist identities, which have not been intended in Hollywood films. That is to say, *Tangerine* stands at the polar opposite of mainstream Hollywood representations in terms of challenging the status quo by offering alternatives to the hegemonic white heterosexual cisgender representations.

6.3 MOONLIGHT (2016)

6.3.1 The plot of *Moonlight*:

The film is consisted of three parts as *Little*, *Chiron* and *Black*. The names represents the life stages of the main character Chiron. In the first stage, the character is represented as a withdrawn child who is subject to bullying by peers. Chiron is found by Juan where he hides from the bullies. On the same day, Chiron stays with Juan and his girlfriend Teresa. The day after, they take him back to his house. Here we realize that Chiron’s mother Paula is a drug dealer. In the next stage of the film, Chiron is represented as a withdrawn teenager. This time he is being bullied by a classmate, named Terrel. On the other hand, we realize that Chiron is still meeting Teresa who lives alone since Juan’s death. This time Paula is represented as being a sex worker in relation with her drug addiction. One night Chiron and his friend Kevin meet at the beach and after a while they start to kiss. It is also in the second stage of the film when Chiron smashes a chair into Terrel’s back in the classroom. In the final stage, Chiron is represented as an adult who deals drugs. One day he
receives a phone call from Kevin and then they reunite.

6.3.2: Stereotypes including drugs, violence and low socioeconomic status in Moonlight

Drugs:

The very beginning of the film starts with a scene in which drug marketing among black men is represented. Here Juan is represented as a drug dealer. In the following scenes Chiron’s mother Paula is portrayed as a drug addict. In one scene Chiron and Kevin are represented as smoking weed, which is surprising for displaying Chiron as accustomed to smoke since he represents a withdrawn character that the audience does not associate with drugs. In the following dialogue the audience gets to know that his smoking habit resulted from his mother’s drug addiction. The embedded message here is that it is black people’s destiny to use drugs. On the other hand, drug addiction of Paula is represented as gendered, racialized and classed. Interconnected nature of gender, race and class hierarchies are especially visible in Paula’s representation, which demonstrates an interplay between her black woman identity and of lower class in an association with drug use. The stereotypical representation here is that drug dealers are more likely to be black men, whereas black mothers are the worst who are usually displayed as lower class single mothers that use drugs.

The war on drugs policies and media representations in the US-America, which targets African American population have conveyed the message that black people and criminality are inextricably related (Welch 2007, pp. 280-283). In parallel to this, Moonlight reflects this stereotypical link between drugs and black population. Nevertheless, there is an important progressive point in Moonlight, which is worth being considered: it is a film with an all-black cast. That is to say, it offers new possibilities for diverse representations. Even though the film confirms the stereotype of black people of lower class as using and selling drugs, it also represents middle-class characters such as black teachers and black police officers throughout the film, which normalizes the idea that African American population is heterogeneous.

Violence:

In the beginning of the film Little is represented as being pursued by his peers who call him ‘faggot.’ In the following scenes, we see that the peers pick on him every day. That way the film
uses stereotypical image of black male in a solidarity role. According to hooks (1996, p. 88), it is common to represent black men as lacking connection and identification with other black people. On the other hand, this stereotype is destroyed with the representation of the same character in a process of transition in which he decides to show others he is not a loser. This decision is a turning point in his life. He smashes a chair over the head of his classmate who has abused him persistently. Now the main character is shifted from passive role to a heroic figure.

The vulnerable characteristics of Chiron bring about the question of discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, + people. Chiron is represented as a withdrawn student who is physically abused for being gay. He does not fit into the ideal definitions of masculinity, thus, he is discriminated by the members of the category of men which idealizes hegemonic masculinity. Butler questions the relation between violence and the category of ‘human.’ According to Butler (2004, p. 25) certain lives are not considered lives at all, and this constitutes another category which refers to ‘unreality.’ Since the new definition does not fit into the category of human, dehumanization occurs. Then it gives rise to physical violence. This formulation of Butler in fact discloses the aspects of violence taking place in Moonlight. Little/Chiron’s black gay identity is not considered real, thus he is positioned into the category of the other by the black heterosexual cisgender supremacy. He then becomes dehumanized and finally becomes victim of violence. As Connell (2005) argues, power differentials formulate a hierarchical structure within masculinities that at once constructs inequality among men from different race, culture, sexuality, and so on. Ultimately, the film represents violence not only as a tool of victimization showed in bullying scenes, but also it represents violent behavior as a step for getting included in the category of manhood. As being symbolized in a scene, Chiron smashes a chair over the head of his classmate who previously excluded him from such a category and placed him in a victimized position. As a result of his physically violent act, Chiron becomes recognizable within the category of black manhood.

Low Socioeconomic Status:

Little/Chiron is represented as a child from low socioeconomic status in the film. In one scene, he is represented as playing football with other black children in the yard with a ball made by newspapers. In another scene, Little/Chiron carries boiled water in a saucepan and pours it into
bathtub in order to take a bath. The sense of class in the film cannot be understood alone without evaluating it in relation to race and gender. hooks (2000, pp. 5-8) argues that ‘class is still often kept separate from race’ because classism is not as easily identified as racism and sexism. Moreover Anthias (2013, p. 124) draws attention to the point of how people avoid to be identified within the category of the poor; also, she states that there is a weak solidary bond among the ones who are identified themselves relating to class, while on the other hand collective solidarities may be found around race and ethnicity. Similarly, the black identities of the lower class have always been told that ‘class can never matter as much as race does’ (hooks 2000, p. 5). In contrast with what hooks argues previously, Moonlight represents classism which is as easily identified as racism and sexism. This representation could be resulted from an intentional purpose in the way of portraying the poor which, as hooks (2000) argues, have no public voice. If the representation of the poor is read as a way of providing visibility, then the film is likely to reflect a progressive step in facilitating the visibility of the lower class which is mainly underrepresented in the mass media. Yet on the other hand, one might argue that the film represents the poor in stereotypical manner, which reinforces the myth that all black people belong to the lower class. This argument is not supported throughout the film because some characters like teachers and police officers are represented as examples of the middle-class.

6.3.3: Power relations including White and/or heterosexual supremacy

White Supremacy:

The white supremacy in terms of character representation cannot be considered in this film since the cast consisted of black performers. Therefore, this section will focus on evaluation of the reactions came from white supremacist film industry related to the all-black cast of the Moonlight. The reactions of the audiences on social media raise a question of the white supremacy in the film industry. In one of the reviews, the film was evaluated as an “awful, one-note picture of the African-American community’s attitude to gay sex” (Salandra 2017), which actually underestimates the political background of the film. Moonlight is the first film with an all-black cast to be awarded in Oscar, Mahershala Ali who plays Juan is the first Muslim to win an Oscar for acting. Finally Barry Jenkins is the fourth black director to earn an Oscar nomination (Coleman 2017). Overall the film’s victory in Oscar could be considered as the progressive voice of black representation in the US-America.
Interestingly, while a white filmmaker is not questioned when they make a film with only white characters; a black filmmaker who makes a work that focuses on subjects exclusively black or white are asked by critics and their audiences to justify their choices (hooks 1996, p.69). Such reactions have their potential grounds within the supremacist culture. Moreover the reactions demonstrate how important for society to watch a film made in the US-America. That is to say, US-American films seem to be considered critically by the society. This attitude of the US society has a potential advantage that could be evolved in a progressive step in which the US society would pay attention to evaluate the films that represent unequal power relations between the social identities.

_Heterosexual Supremacy:_

Binary opposition of gay versus heterosexual is represented in the film. Homophobic bullying is used to show a myth that an ideal manhood is a rigid one, which is consisted of masculine, aggressive and hegemonic characteristics. Any other gender identity out of this stereotype is considered as ‘faggot.’ Nevertheless not all masculine men are represented as homophobic in the film. Juan is displayed as a black heterosexual masculine man who has at the same time caring and protective characteristics. Therefore the film suggests that what needs to be questioned is aggressive and hegemonic manhood which excludes alternative representations of the category. Also, it could be argued that *Moonlight* holds a politically progressive message and a remarkable achievement in black LGBT+ visibility, which is not obvious in *Tangerine* or *Set It Off*. It is evident in a scene where Chiron asks Juan, "What's a faggot?" The response of Juan is that, "A 'faggot' is a word used to make gay people feel bad." Then Chiron asks if he is one, Juan answers he could be a gay, but he does not have to let anyone call him a faggot. The film breaks the stereotype in which black people ‘absorbed narrow representations of black masculinity’ (hooks 1992, p. 89). Such one-dimensional accounts are disrupted in the film with the representation of Juan and Chiron who represent alternative masculinities throughout the film. Juan represents masculine heterosexual manhood which does not constitute hegemonic power over other masculinities. On the other hand, Chiron represents gay masculinity which finds a support from heterosexual masculinity that is not supremacist. In this regard, the film suggests a social change in which the static meaning of the manhood would be converted. Finally, the film suggests another progressive step by representing Chiron as not attempting to avoid his black gay identity even though his manhood evolves from less masculine to more masculine gender performance. That is to say, the film offers
criticism towards the heterosexual supremacy by portraying a black gay man as adopting his sexuality.

6.3.4: The representation of gender

Rites of passage and masculinity:

After being severely beaten by the peers, Chiron meets a social worker at the school. The words of the social worker are questionable concerning the definition of manhood and masculinity. She says: “If you were a man, there’d be four other knuckleheads sitting right next to you.” In the following scene Chiron is represented as breaking a chair over Terrel who frequently bullies him at the school. Later we see Chiron as being arrested. After that scene, the third part of the film starts with the name of “Black”, which is a nickname given to Chiron by Kevin. A physical transformation of Chiron is represented. Now Chiron goes by the nickname Black, and being represented as an ideal masculine male with gold teeth who deals drugs. He has a muscular body and uses luxuries cars with loud music.

Masculinity has been commonly recognized as an essential characteristics of men across time and context (Hall 1997), yet on the other hand compulsory masculinity might be a burden on many different kinds of men and boys (Halberstam 1998, p. 273). Halberstam (1998, p. 273) exemplifies boxing as a tool to prove masculinity. There is a similarity between the physical damage directed at others in boxing, and the Chiron’s physical damage directed at Terrel. As is the case in boxing metaphor of Halberstam, Chiron in Moonlight was the winner who has been beaten but remains standing long enough to deliver the knockout punch. Hooks (1995, p. 186) argues that it is possible to encounter black people adopting white supremacist beliefs and exercise power over one another. In the film we see the direct violence of Terrel towards Chiron at the school context. This can be read as an exercise of power in combination with homophobia. As Connell (2005) states, power differentials formulates hierarchical structures within masculinities. In Moonlight, we see the domination of heterosexual masculinity aims to suppress alternative masculinities.

The “bad” single mother versus the “good” woman savior:

Women representations in films are commonly stereotyped in binary terms as the idealized and the deviant (Barker 1999). This is the case in this film as well. There are two opposite
representations of women: Chiron’s miserable mother Paula and a caring Teresa. The intersecting social categories here are gender, race, class and motherhood. Paula is represented as single, drug addict woman who works as a sex worker that is associated with her lower class status in the film. In this regard her representation does not break Hollywood’s traditional representation of poor black women as sex workers (hooks 1994, p. 56). In one of the scenes, Paula is represented as asking money from Chiron and takes all his money by force in order to buy drugs. It is evident that *Moonlight* offers a stereotypical representation of a black mother. The myth here is that the black woman controls and emasculates their sons (hooks 1995, p.80). Also, the myth of ‘black women are not able to raise children by themselves’ is reinforced in the film. Nevertheless another traditional stereotype which portrays black women as more responsible and less lazy than black men (hooks 1995, p.80) is disrupted in the film. The representation of Juan breaks this racist and sexist assumption. On the other hand Teresa, a girlfriend of Juan, is a representation of middle-class woman who has caring and understanding characteristics and also presenting nurturing and protective behaviors towards Chiron.

**Summary**

The intersection of multiple oppressed identities in *Moonlight* are revolved around race, gender, sexuality and class. Nevertheless the representation of class in films rarely adopts an oppositional stance towards the misrepresentation of the poor. The representation of the lower class in *Moonlight* reflects two sides of the same coin in which it becomes questionable to find out whether it interrogates or reinforces racism along with sexism and classism. As hooks (2000, p.7) argues, it is not possible to ‘talk meaningfully about ending racism without talking about class.’ In this regard the representation of black lower-class gay man in *Moonlight* reinforces the traditional stereotypes. Nevertheless the all-black cast nature of the film offers a significant progress in the US-American cinema industry in the way of portraying diverse race, gender, sexuality and class representations. Moreover, *Moonlight* is a groundbreaking film by representing black gay man without marginalizing it along with the portrayal of the black gay man’s self-acceptance and celebration of his black and gay identity. It is evident in the last part of the film in which Little/Chiron embraces the nickname of “Black.” Also he is portrayed as adopting his gay identity in a scene where he reunites with Kevin after years.
7. Conclusions

I explored the black lesbian, black gay and black transgender representations in the three US-American films; *Set It Off*, *Tangerine* and *Moonlight* with an aim of conducting a comprehensive analysis that draws upon the intersectionality and the feminist film theory. I have attempted to explain how stereotypes, white and/or cisgender heterosexual supremacy and gender inequalities have been reproduced in the three films. My analysis has shown that those three dimensions are intersecting in each films.

I found that drugs, violence and low socioeconomic status are represented in stereotypical ways in the all three films. The films represent black gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals as lower-class drug users who somehow being engaged with violent acts. Besides, *Set It Off* and *Tangerine* represent white supremacy by displaying white characters in superior social positions as opposed to black characters who are represented as valueless in any society. On the other hand, *Moonlight* does not constitute hierarchical power relations based on race since the cast of the film is consisted merely of the black characters, which could be considered as reflection of the strong voice of the oppressed within the US-American film industry which is dominated by the white representations. Meanwhile the three films represent cisgender heterosexual supremacy which posits lesbian, gay and transgender identities in marginalized positions in a given society. For instance, *Set It Off* represents this kind of oppression with a portrayal of two black lesbian women as devalued. Moreover they are devalued by the representation of black heterosexuality, therefore black lesbianism is represented as an oppressed of the oppressed. That is to say, black lesbian identity is overshadowed by the black heterosexuality. Similarly, *Moonlight* represents black gay man as being oppressed by the black heterosexual men which demonstrates sexuality as being constituted in hierarchical terms regardless of the race. On the other hand, in *Tangerine*, white cisgender supremacy is represented by displaying black transgender individuals as holding the belief that “real” womanhood is about being white and cisgender.

Consequently, I have found that the representation of gender in the all three films is interrelated. The films offer alternative meanings to the binary categories of men and women. *Set It Off* represents both butch and femme lesbian women which suggests wider representation of the category of women. In this regard the mainstream audiences become likely to perceive black
womanhood not only as hyper-feminine but also as masculine. Similarly, *Tangerine* offers new possibilities for the category of women by the representation of the black transgender sex workers. Finally *Moonlight* represents black gay man who once being targeted by those who are “masculine enough.” Even though various gender representations in three films are progressive in terms of offering the non-binary understanding of the gender, to what degree such representations contribute to the advocating of LGBTI+ rights differs in each film.

8. Limitations

What has emerged in my thesis is an intersectional picture of the representation of black lesbian, gay and transgender identities in three US-American films. Through the feminist film theory and the intersectionality analysis of *Set It Off, Tangerine* and *Moonlight*, this thesis discusses the representations of black lesbian, gay and transgender in the US-American films. Even though the analysis has reached its aims, there are some limitations. First of all, the small number of the analyzed films raise the question of representativeness. Since I analyzed three US-American films, it is not accurate to generalize the black lesbian, gay, transgender representations in those films to the all related US-American films. Nevertheless I attempted to approach common representations with an ‘accumulative technique’ which refers to drawing on the literature and critics related to the black lesbian, gay, transgender representations in order to illuminate more generalized themes (Willig, 2008). On the other hand, even though analyzing films that have different genres and the year of production seems seminal, such differences also make it harder to compare them. Aside from this, my attempt to analyze the US-American films as a non-US person might have affected my evaluations related to the films due to the fact that I do not have full understanding of the social relations and of the perceptions of the US society related to the three films.

9. Discussion

I have analyzed *Set It Off, Tangerine* and *Moonlight* which are US-American films with the black lesbian, black gay and black transgender representations. In this thesis I have highlighted three common dimensions in the three films that are interrelated in terms of representing the black lesbian, gay, transgender identities. The three dimensions I investigated are *stereotypes, white and/or cisgender heterosexual supremacy* and *gender inequalities*. In reconnection with one of my thesis aims, which was to analyze gender relations in films, I have conducted feminist film theory
along with intersectional approach. In this regard, I mainly draw on bell hooks’ theorizations to analyze representation of women, men, femininity, masculinity and their intersections with race, sexuality and class.

In the first step of the evaluation, I found stereotypical representations in all three films where black gay, lesbian and transgender individuals are associated with lower-class, drugs and with violent incidences. That way the three films reinforce the cultural mythology of all black people are poor, violent who use or sell drugs. On the other hand the films seem differ in terms of the aim behind such representations. For instance the embedded message in *Set It Off* is that two black lesbian women are different from black heterosexual women in terms of their behaviors, gender performances and relationships. Interestingly, class difference is not represented between all four black women in the film. That is to say, two black lesbian characters in the film are represented as having a relationship which is merely based on passion in contrast with the representation of black heterosexual couple which includes more feelings than just passion. This representation no doubt reinforces the cultural myth that lesbian relationships are lack of romance and are only based on sexual desire. Besides, while one of the black lesbian character displays masculine gender performance along with a trait of anger, another black lesbian represents a feminine character who does not speak at all through the film. It is evident that masculinity regardless of sex is associated with anger, hegemony and physical power, yet femininity is considered as being submissive.

In *Tangerine*, two black transgender sex workers are associated with lower-class, drugs, and violent incidences. Nevertheless the film differs from *Set It Off* in the way of displaying white characters in such stereotypical representations. That way the film cannot be accused for reinforcing racist ideology. Moreover white and black characters are both represented in lower-class. Yet, such representations are likely to disclose an oppression based on gender because while the white characters are cisgender and heterosexual, the black characters are transgender. Besides, being a sex worker is not associated with race in the film since there are both white and black sex workers. Nevertheless, the film could be recognized as a criticism of transmisogyny since it represents an internalized transmisogyny of the two transgender characters. That is to say, when the film is evaluated with a critical eye, one can realize that it suggests an impact of the attitudes of the white heterosexual cisgender supremacist US-American society towards black transgender
individuals. Furthermore, the film is distinctive from *Set It Off* in terms of its genre. While *Tangerine* is an independent film, the latter is an example of Hollywood. Most interestingly, while *Tangerine* has a white male director, the latter has a black male director. It is evident that the oppressed identities do not necessarily aim to criticize the supremacist ideology. One can adopt the ideology of the oppressor in order to avoid being abjected.

Finally, *Moonlight* represents a black gay character who is oppressed by the black community itself, which constitutes hegemonic relations based on gender and sexuality instead of race as is the case in *Set It Off* and *Tangerine*. The film suggests an oppression based on gender and sexuality. Yet I think the most important point of the film is its all-black cast which offers heterogeneity of the black population in contrast with the cultural myths which place black individuals in stereotypical positions in a given society. More specifically, the film represents male masculinity in various forms ranging from hegemonic heterosexual masculine supremacy to oppressed gay masculinity; as it does class from lower class to middle class. Moreover, in contrast to the cultural myth that defines black manhood in aggressive super masculine terms along with homophobic and misogynist attitudes, the film represents the heterosexual masculine man who is taking care of the gay male child and being represented while declaring his support of the gay identities. In this regard *Moonlight* is a film with a progressive representations of race, gender, sexuality and class.

Even though I achieved what I aimed in this paper by analyzing and identifying the common points in the three films, there are some limitations including representativeness. The analysis of the three US-American films lacks the nature of generalizability. Secondly, it was hard to analyze and compare the three films which have different genres and different year of production. Moreover, considering the three films are US-American films, it could be argued that being outsider might affect my evaluations since I don’t have a full understanding of the social relations and of the perceptions of the US society. Nevertheless, I think holding an analysis as an outsider has advantages as well. Considering that the Hollywood’s domination over European film industry makes US-American films to reach wider societies than just of the American society, it could be beneficial to reflect outside perspective in the way to point the things that might be less visible to an insider. On the other hand I did not face any issues related to the theoretical frameworks or methods. Both feminist film theory and intersectionality theory work well with the analysis. The future research needs to focus on bisexual representations in films, which is a rarely portrayed
subject in films. Moreover, cross-cultural comparison of the relevant films in the future research could contribute to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, + media activism, to the critical film studies as well as to the film and lgbt+ discussions in academia.
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**Filmography**

*Moonlight* (2016), directed by Barry Jenkins.

*Set It Off* (1996), directed by Felix Gary Gray.

*Tangerine* (2015), directed by Sean Baker.