

**Exploring the Fluidity of Becoming: A Stylistic Analysis of
Claudia Morgado E.'s *No Bikini***
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Abstract

The paper is a critical exploration of the fluidity of becoming through the character of Robin in Claudia Morgado Escanilla's short film *No Bikini*¹ (2007). The paper further investigates the role of water in the dynamic configurations of the paradigms of gender expressions and highlights Robin's relationship with water in their process of 'becoming.' An extensive focus on the stylistic construction of Robin's character and the space of the swimming pool is analysed in rendering further possibilities of extending one's self beyond the realms of the heteronormative world. Hence, this paper essays at understanding the positionality of children amidst the larger queer expressions predominantly constitutive of adult lives, and how children negotiate gender roles and a child's casual manner of queering heteronormative structures, are further studied.

Keywords: Fluidity, Becoming, Gender, Water, Heteronormative, Queer

Introduction

*I kept looking at the swimming pool. You know, it is a wonderful subject –
water, and light on the water ... every time you look at a pool, it is a
different blue. And each time you see it, it takes on a different character.*
-- Butterfield and Hockney 74

Such were David Hockney's remarks on his pools, describing them as "Blue hedonistic pools" (Butterfield and Hockney 76) towards the end of his interview with Jan Butterfield. Hockney's pool paintings are particularly invested with the imageries of self-indulgence; where two selves interact and confront each other. As in Hockney's famous *Portrait of an Artist* (1972), the clothed self and unclothed self, belonging to completely different terrains of social existence meet each other for better or worse (Brown and Hirsch 2014: 17-18). David Hockney's explorations of "queer experience" or "queer pleasure" (Valinsky) is indeed a point of departure in terms of homosexual self-expression and self-representation. However, as problematized by scholars such as Mack-Nataf and Julia Parnaby, the discursive practices within art and literature, including seminal artists like David Hockney had rather sustained a partial approach with 'male body' at the centre of queering heteronormative society (Sullivan 48). Considering the underdevelopment in the discursive practices of non-binomial sexualities and its varied representations across continents, the paper situates Claudia Morgado E.'s work



within the larger framework of queering heteronormative spaces and practices, where the male body is decentred. The question of ‘male desire’ and ‘male pleasure’ recedes to the background by situating a seven-year-old child at the centre of what queer theorist call “to quiz or ridicule, to spoil, put out of order” (Sullivan 52) the heteronormative societal structures.

Claudia Morgado Escanilla was born in Santiago, Chile and immigrated to Canada, graduated in Film Program from Concordia University, Montreal in 1991. Having studied the film program at Concordia University, Claudia Morgado E. produced, wrote as well as directed eleven short films. The film chosen for analysis is *No Bikini* (2007), a nine-minute short film that revolves around a girl Robin, who spends six weeks of their summer swimming camp, passing as a boy. In this film, like her other films - *Unbound* (1995), *Anguish* (1996), *Savour Me* (1998), *Sufferance* (2000), and *Bitten* (2002) - female body becomes a site of contestation, negotiation and representation. In an interview Claudia Morgado Escanilla speaks of her motif with regard to the film *No Bikini* by stating that “when I adapted the story into a script, I wanted to make it about empowerment, about harnessing a sense of freedom that enabled the protagonist to do whatever they wanted with their body” (Araneda and Morgado E.). Through these films, Claudia aims to historicise the “female body” and “female desire” that defies male expectations and traverses in the direction of liberation of the self by breaking heteronormative boundaries.

As the action in *No Bikini* (2007) unfolds that after being dropped off at the camp by their mother, Robin loses the bikini bought by the mother for the camp and enters the pool wearing just briefs, like the boys. Because of the sartorial conditioning of society, Robin is viewed as a boy and continues to spend time in the camp with the other boys. Robin spends unsupervised free time playing with the boys at the centre of the pool while the girls sit by the ledge and converse. Robin even attempts the five-meter diving plank, something that many boys of their age do effortlessly. Racing with the boys for the medal is another such activity. Robin finishes the camp successfully in this manner and even wins the champion's medal. Robin's mother catches hold of their clever ploy when she reads the note the instructor left with Robin, in which it refers to Robin as her son. For such fluidity that Robin ingeniously snatches from society, they narrates it as having gone through "sex change" once when they was seven years old.

Swimming Pool and the “Contextual Salience of Gender”



The Shot 1a of *No Bikini* (Morgado E. 01:00) resonates the elements of the swimming pool which David Hockney so admired. The ‘hedonism’ symbolic of Robin’s position within the pool and how such an indulgence is crucial for playfully exploring as well as questioning the heteronormative practices of the pool space in particular and society in general. The top-down view depicts an empty glistening swimming pool where lines underneath is obvious. Water ripples represent movement, a life ensconced in the pool. The lines are reminiscent of a Foucauldian world order. The pervasiveness of power reflected on the ordered lanes mapping the taxonomy of subjects swimming along its confinements. In this context, the power surreptitiously structures the rationale of sexuality. The lanes, discreet yet conspicuous, lie low under water yet have the power to exercise control over conditions of movement. Human relationships re-enact the nature of water. They are palpable, but always manage to wiggle away from our grasps. As an entity, water consistently exhibits that quality of being dense while also permeable in nature. Inherently, such a structure can render possible contextual variations in the subscribed social order. Robin, the protagonist in *No Bikini* is initially portrayed performing a backstroke, wading from the top towards the camera. As Robin looks at the world from upside down, the rims of the pool remain outside the frame creating the impression of a wider expanse. Thus, the wideness of their world gets defined within the limiting expanse of a swimming pool when filmed keeping outside of the frame, the walls of the pool itself. As they moves diagonally from right to left, the underlying blue and black lines are visible underneath the ripples. Robin comes across as a floating entity.

In the initial shots, the pool comes across as blocks of blue and black. Robin swerves in and out of focus as they tries on the bikini and is caught gazing into the mirror. Shot 4a makes this superimposition quite evident and in there lies the image of Robin. The convergence of the wet and dry worlds on the screen compels one to acknowledge the significance of the way societal norms are expressed and played out in public and private spaces. The swimming pool is a well-built space, constructed in accordance with the norms of the society itself, as water becomes a versatile medium for negotiating identities (Scott 126) and “a space of bodily and sexual metamorphosis” (Brown and Hirsch 18). By desexualizing naked and semi-naked bodies (Scott 130), especially of children, it destabilizes gender and sexuality while at the same time freezing the interplay of sexualities in certain instances. For example, even in the scene where the children form a single file (from Shot 9b to Shot 19a: Morgado E. *No Bikini* 1:36 – 2:18), there remained still the "contextual salience of gender" (Musto 361) where segregation is casually



played out. Robin is strategically positioned in-between this segregation, occupying that “liminal space” (Bhabha 04) where the possibilities of an identity flux appear great. They becomes the line, at least for the audience, a line of distinction. This distinction is also evident when Mrs. Delaware commands Robin to “Straighten up!”, a warning directed at Robin with the assumption/understanding that they are a boy. However, when the kids are asked to “jump in the pool!” by the instructor Mrs. Delaware (Shot 19b, *No Bikini* 2:19), this segregation according to biological sex is rendered meaningless only in that instant. As inferred by Michela Musto in her study where gender mattered more especially during “unsupervised free time,” the hierarchy of genders remained intact from the configurations of social interaction (Shot 20a to Shot 30, *No Bikini* 2:20 – 3:04) (375). In spite of the fact that segregation is not as apparent in modern day pools as it did in the 1930s and 1940s (Smith 41), similar manifestations still exist where “contextual salience of gender” continues to determine how kids act with one another.

As the film explores the playfulness symbolic of the pool water, the ominous sounds of underwater shots of children participating in “unsupervised free time” are anatomically distinct reiterating Musto’s point of view of gender assuming a vital role during “unsupervised free time”. The ones identifying as boys occupy the centre of the pool while the girls use the peripheral wall as support, mimicking the processes of a duck: grace above the water and continuous paddling beneath it (Brown and Hirsch 18). These images are juxtaposed with Robin's face, which is captured up close underwater in Shot 31b.



Shot 31b (*No Bikini* 3:11)



The film at this point illustrates how Robin stands out from the rest of the children. They is shown as a water being, as someone belonging to the aquatic world and being comfortable within such a realm. Indicative of this reading, Claudia expresses in one of her interviews with Ileana Pietrobruno that Robin was asked to “pretend (to be) a fish” to capture the essence of the film as well as Robin’s character, placed between the worlds that is neither heteronormative nor homonormative.

Robin’s Relationship with Water

Robin is initially shown to emerge from the dry world, constitutive of heteronormative constructions, which includes their mother as well wherein, the biological and sartorial expectations of being identified as a boy or a girl is rather a flaw of the structure itself from Robin’s point of view. Robin loses the bikini, bought by their mother for the camp as nonchalantly as possible between Shot 4a and Shot 7c (*No Bikini* 00:51 – 1:22) wherein their emergence from behind the curtains with just the briefs is an intelligent twisting of the structural flaw in society’s practices of gender identification.



Shot 4a (00:51)



Shot 4c (00:56)



Shot 7c (1:22)

As the training begins with unsupervised free time for the children, and as discussed above with the “contextual salience of gender” especially without the overt intervention of the heteronormative authority, Robin wades through performing as a boy with the utmost natural elasticity. In this context, Robin mingles with the boys as one among them. They is also found expressing through the voice over narration that “I wasn’t pretending. I just was.” (Shot 31b, *No Bikini* 3:11) while they was indulged in such a performance.

However, in Robin’s understanding of ‘being a boy’, daring to perform scary acts form a major act of performing as a boy. As illustrated by Robin's fear of diving off a five-meter plank when boys their age do it confidently, the depth of the pool still holds an overwhelming power over



their personality. It reinforces the rigid boundaries that defy gender fluidity, as Robin stands on the cusp of their being of a girl and that of a boy. A looming contrast between the two worlds emerges from the film. One is a dry world where Robin is forced to perform as a girl (Robin's mother chooses the bikini), a vignette of heteronormativity and anatomical sexual determinism in our societies. The other is a wet world, where "sex change" (Shot 2, *No Bikini* 00:26) is a possibility. "Sex change" refers to the process of identifying and performing as another gender without undergoing the medical procedure of transitioning from a stagnant cis gender identity to a transgender identity. At this juncture, conquering the depths of the water is both an act of defiance and a step in understanding the attributes of water, to channel their efforts into performing as a boy at the social situational level and becoming water or whatever beyond the strictures of the society where ingraining its liquid essence becomes rudimentary. Fear thickens the boundary between being a girl and a boy.

Robin is left with little choice but to become one with the element. They has to take control over the nature of water itself, in whichever form they views it; wherein the quality of the water makes them feel light, at the same time demands strength and courage as seen in the scene with Robin lacking the courage to take the dive. Robin's relationship with water hangs in the balance as they strives to publicly identify as a boy through performing tasks which Robin assumes essential for identifying as one. Directorial aesthetics of presenting Robin derives their character outside the traditional binaries of gender, as reflected in shot 31b (*No Bikini* 3:11), where Robin's essence and journey of transition traverses beyond identifying through performance as a boy. At this juncture, the pool water becomes a catalyst.

From Shot 1a (*No Bikini* 00:1) to Shot 43 (*No Bikini* 4:06) and Shot 45 (*No Bikini* 4:11), this water is viewed from varied perspectives. The pool and water are the same. When the pool water is viewed through the perspective of a worried Robin, the water lacks the initial charm that it held from the perspective of the director. Through angular modification and the camera movement in accordance with the flowy characteristics of the water, the camera portrays a notion of distance, not literally, but metaphorically. The distance between Robin, the girl (as viewed by the mother), and transforming into a trans individual; the duality embodied in the existence of Robin, to their becoming one with water or even beyond. Through Robin's leap into the deep end of the pool, this distance is wiped away and they come closer. Robin is positioned outside the binary wherein surface/marginal represent the world of the girls, the median space between the surface and the deep end signify the space of the boys and the third



space, the deep end, which Robin occupies with all the naturalness conceived possible (shot 31b, *No Bikini* 3:11) conceptualizes as itself beyond the realms constructed in a dichotomous gender perspective.

Further, the camera plays a key role in establishing the differences between the dry and wet worlds, like in Shot 22 (*No Bikini* 2:33). It draws a horizontal line as the half-immersed camera shifts to a full immersion as shown in Shots 50, 51, and 52 (*No Bikini* 4:18 – 4:33). At this stage of the narrative, the underwater lights emanating from the pool wall render the bright blue colour of the water a midnight blue hue, suggesting Robin's presence and mobility within the depths of the water; thus, denoting Robin's transformation as a character. In the process of unravelling their cavernous self, Robin transitions from their surficial existence as a girl into that of a boy. An understanding of the depth of the water reflects an understanding of their own self. Water becomes a medium through which Robin gets to acquire the knowledge of their being. In the same shots, Robin swims away from the camera; a complete opposite of the introductory shot and the median shot with them facing the camera up close. The angles of the camera, the director and the spectator shift from the top to the middle to the bottom and look up at Robin as they swims away, the stylistics through which this "sex change" travels through different stages and becomes complete.

Robin's struggle with the water's volume and potential continues when, as a final challenge, the kids have to race against each other. As the picturization of Robin winning the race debunks the salience of gender in acquiring skills of a good swimmer, it blurs the distinction between human and non-human in Shot 62 (*No Bikini* 5:26). This is evident in the similitude of Morgado E.'s shot construction that echoes Peter Greenaway's superimposition of animals in the water over shots of people swimming in the pool in his *Making a Splash* (1984) wherein the artist explores the human beings' "primordial affinity to water" (Amy Lawrence as qtd by BFI). Morgado E. similarly navigates Robin's relationship with water and presents the character as belonging naturally to the water realm than anything else especially in shot 39 where Robin expresses the naturalness of their existence in the water realm. At this point, the distinction between the two worlds, of Robin inhabiting two worlds in the race situation is reaffirmed as they is moving back to the dry world by the end of the film.

Fluidity of Becoming



The film is an effective manifestation of the idea of becoming something more than the dictates of society that attains grounding over and above the material through the character of Robin. A sense of simplicity and naturalness resonates with Robin's experience aligned with the Deleuzian concept of 'becoming' in which the process of transformation of the self does not end when you become a target subject (in Robin's case, a boy). Further, it extends to defining oneself at the molecular level (279) as evinced in Morgado E.'s narrative/shot constructions. In this way, the configurations of fluidity rendered possible by the pool water also transcend structurally to Robin himself where the essence of becoming more lies at shedding the imposed societal order. Robin's stripping or stepping out of bikini represents their resistance against the oppressive structure, but it is also a sign that they is moving toward becoming a boy, especially when other societal agents of surveillance are present (children, instructor etc). When Robin is alone without the heteronormative surveillant eyes, the film through its aesthetic composition portrays them as undergoing other processes of "becoming-imperceptible" (Karkov 384). However, in no way does this progression from becoming-boy, to becoming-water, to becoming-whatever or existing naturally, entail a downward shift in hierarchy. Rather the opposite is true for Robin, where living as a masked self, or being a static self, undermines the true essence of one's being or the true purpose of one's being. Therefore, Robin's narrative questions the hierarchy itself by focusing on what it means to be natural. By doing this, it destroys the arbitrary hierarchy based on the tendency of humans to view themselves as progressive and advanced only when they are totally detached from nature. The structural dichotomy of nature/culture gets represented between the experiences of bikini clad Robin to the bikiniless Robin.

Ronin's sense of feeling "natural" or as they expresses "I just was", epitomizes the sense of existence that is particularly triggered by the smell of the pool. Robin loves the pool because they all smell the same. They feels perfectly at home in the chlorinated water than in the heteronormative, dry human world, and the smell of the pool majorly contributes to this perception. Robin further says that they "never once felt naked" while in the pool. The transference from performing as a girl to a trans-being and further towards feeling "natural" or not feeling "naked" convolutes through the smell of chlorinated water, that especially gives Robin the sense of existing naturally. In this connection, artificially/manually created smell that Robin associates with their being makes possible the presentation of Robin beyond the realms of human. Eventually, when they immerses themselves in the pool, they embraces the opportunity to live naturally, more focused on 'being' in the state of whatever than 'becoming'



something, because the water makes no distinction unlike the heteronormative dry world of the human beings. This could be an attribution towards the reworkings of nature and culture dichotomies where culture claims as its resources the nature and thus, the deriving of the sense of "natural" from a culturally, manually, artificially crafted smell of the pool water, signifies the breaking of these structuralist dichotomies and further locating oneself in a plain devoid of such dichotomies (Haraway 09). The contradiction Robin evokes through their corporeal indulgence is a strike down at constructed binaries of social performance and a creation of "heterotopia" (Foucault xix) or a 'hydrotopia' where trans identity and transition between identities becomes the norm.

As the film comes to an end, Robin returns to the world dominated by their mother (representing the heteronormative societal order), with no trace of despair or frustration in performing as a girl, given that they does express a desire to keep the camp going forever. Having embraced the trans existence with vivacity through stripping off the bikini, and enjoying the feeling of existing naturally nor ascribing the terms shame and nude to Robin's body, the character flows through various levels of existence. Robin, being a seven-year-old, thus understands and navigates the models of an overtly gendered society by identifying the nooks for a trans existence, even if its entirely ephemeral.

Conclusion

Although discussions regarding gender and its representation in relation to children find marginal space within academia, Robin's character in *No Bikini* makes up for what is lacking in words, with images. As highlighted by scholars such as Nikki Sullivan and Sophie Mayer among others, wherein they point out that male desire gains prominence in the larger canvas of queer representations (Mayer 86), the position and representation of children within such a framework also gets marginalised. Children's bodies and the palpable desexualisation of their bodies in narratives are often viewed as texts lacking the avenues for expressing queer representation or concerns. Within such a framework, Claudia Morgado E., positions a seven-year-old child which according to the director, in her interview with Ileana Pietrobruno expresses that directing kids was a freeing experience as she believes that "Kids have (bring) their own magic" to the screen. The magic or the possibilities of queer experience which is impossible to conceive of with adult bodies. Therefore, Claudia Morgado E. structurally visibilizes the rather "apparitional" (Mayer 86) existence of children in queering the dominant heteronormative structures.



In essence, the narrative of *No Bikini* deals with the choice made by a seven-year-old Robin against popular construction of bodies, a "transversal" struggle (Foucault 780) specifically against the sexualization of female bodies (both children and adults) in a public setting such as the swimming pool. The idea of 'nature' and 'natural' are played out without huge boards instructing the Do's and Don'ts especially for children. A child's understanding of their role is naturalized, and they are able to recognize when they are crossing a societal norm or boundary. Similar to Robin's awareness of the societal structuring of gender and having found a bug in it, the children lining up according to their sex, Mrs. Delaware correcting Robin's gaze, segregation during fun time and the instructor's voice over in the background ordering boys to stay away from the girl's changing room in Shot 69a and Shot 69b speaks in reversal or the undoing of Musto's concept of the "spillover" (364). As a counterbalance to all these constructions, Robin asserts in Shot 39, "the water running over my back felt simple and natural". The relationship Robin establishes with the water, signifying an intimacy beyond the frameworks of skill development and physical fitness which swimming pool stands for, materializes only from their nakedness.

Thus, debunks the popular notions of 'natural' and embraces the primal essence of their being by experiencing the world bare bodied and discovering their true self. As such, water becomes the medium beyond the representation of "life, birth and rebirth, creation and creativity" (Parente-Capkova 189) in a traditional sense, to becoming a catalyst for gender identity transversal existence. The refusal of Claudia Morgado E., in the interview with Michele Meek (2022), to appropriate the film to a particular gender category is analogous to the reading of Robin's character beyond simply human. The filmic composition primarily makes it possible to view Robin's characterization within the frameworks of Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (07) wherein the congenital essence of being and becoming lies in its fluid and ephemeral nature.

Notes

¹The paper has used the gender pronouns they/them in line with the character's explorations of their gender identity

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