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Queer temporalities in Mariana Rondón's *Pelo malo/ Bad Hair* (2013)

ABSTRACT

*Sometimes criticized for the film's emphasis on delay and 'dead time', the present analysis suggests a reading of the seemingly stagnant plot-line of Mariana Rondón's *Pelo malo/Bad Hair* (2013) as an effective rhetorical strategy for interpellating viewers into the 'sideways' time of queer childhood – a theoretical framework established by Kathryn Bond Stockton – to explore the intersectional processes at work in the subject formation of Junior, the film's 9-year-old Afro-Venezuelan protagonist. In contrast to most contemporary Latin American films with child protagonists that serve as embodiments of history, Rondón refuses viewers this temporal distance to depict a child undergoing ghostly erasure by the patriarchal mechanisms that dictate the terms of a nation's history and citizenship.*

KEYWORDS

Latin American cinema
Venezuela
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gender studies
intersectionality
temporal critique
ghosts

Before this past year's continental tip to the political Right, conversations were ongoing about the relationship between the left-leaning Latin American Pink Tide of the early twenty-first century and ensuing advances for the rights of women and so-called sexual minorities in countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, where, for example, same-sex marriage is now legal. While this progress can be seen as a repudiation of the heteronormative logic that upheld neofascist dictatorships throughout much of the twentieth century, Venezuela's leftward trajectory into the new millennium has been more

ambiguous. With the election of Hugo Chávez in 1999 came a rapprochement with Cuba, whose revolutionary ideals were historically embodied in the 'hombre nuevo' who was masculine enough to stand up against US economic and cultural imperialism. While in the last decade-and-a-half, political rhetoric in Venezuela has followed that of Cuba in paying lip service to ameliorating gender-related inequalities, political practice has failed to bring about progress in a country where economic stability and a call for ideological purity continue to take centre stage within an unchanging masculinist framework.

Set during Chávez's final months as president and released to the international film festival circuit shortly after his death (yet well before the unprecedented crisis the country is currently experiencing), Mariana Rondón's *Pelo malo/Bad Hair* (2013) calls attention to the gendered and racialized violence that polices the terms of Venezuelan citizenship, upholding the sociopolitical status quo and foreclosing on the possibility of the country's leftist government fulfilling its rhetorical mission of creating an egalitarian society. While post-2000 cinematic reflections on nationhood in Latin America have often occurred through the rhetorical figure of the child in ways that re-inscribe conservative notions of social subjectivity and a heteronormative political paradigm, I will argue that Rondón works against these tendencies by deploying the child as a ghostly figure whose subjectivity is being erased by history rather than representing him as an embodiment of history.

The protagonist is a 9-year-old 'mixed-race' boy named Junior who has already internalized the racist social grammar that conjugates African hair as 'bad' (hence the film's title), but he has done so using the sexist declension designated for females, preening and obsessing about his hair in preparation for the photo that he will need for his ID card for the fast-approaching school year. Junior's stubborn endeavour to straighten out his supposedly 'bad' hair provokes corrective violence from his light-skinned mother, Marta, who is struggling to make ends meet, having recently lost both her husband to criminal violence and her job as a security guard to unyielding sexism in a profession gendered as exclusively masculine. Unable to pay for a babysitter while she attempts to find employment, Marta leaves Junior with Carmen – the boy's paternal (and therefore Afro-Venezuelan) grandmother – who shows him how to straighten his hair and encourages him to pose as a singer for his school photo, even sewing a flamboyant costume for him in an attempt to convince Marta to grant her custody of the hopelessly effeminate child. Left without economic options, Marta agrees to sleep with her former boss to get her job back, subjugated by patriarchy while simultaneously enforcing it as she takes drastic measures to straighten Junior out and teach him how to be a man. Now able to purchase an automatic razor, she presents the child with an ultimatum: shave off his hair completely or go to live with his grandmother. With no agency or autonomy of his own, Junior is forced to agree to shave his head indefinitely, to commit to ongoing processes of self-censorship to render invisible parts of himself viewed as undesirable by others.

The result is a narrative with an unusual capacity to highlight the intersectionality of the protagonist's formation as a social subject and a Venezuelan (non-)citizen-in-the-making, teasing out the contradictions inherent in the identification of individuals based on their perceived gender, race, class and sexual orientation, Catholic cultural assumptions about the sanctity of the mother-son relationship and the supposed angelic, non-desiring nature of prepubescent children. This article works with Kathryn Bond Stockton's concept of 'growing sideways' in her theorizations on the queer child to analyse

the narrative strategies employed by Rondón – particularly her emphasis on an aesthetics of delay – in her effort to queer the traditional use of the rhetorical Child: a figure described as ‘ghostly’ by Stockton in its holographic projection of adult ideology onto the blank canvas of children who have yet to become self-representing social subjects, stewards of their own bodies.

In their introduction to the section of their cultural studies reader dedicated to ‘Spectral subjectivities: Gender, sexuality, race’, María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren posit that ‘categories of subjectification like gender, sexuality, and race can themselves be conceived as spectral’ (2013: 310). They draw from Judith Butler’s work to illustrate how

the subject’s identity is disjointed as it becomes both *revenant* and *arri-
vant*: it returns from the past (citing a history without being anchored in
a singular origin or essence), while at the same time constituting its own
futuraity, arriving, as it were, from iterative acts yet to occur.

(2013: 310)

My aim is to expand this concept of ghostliness within the context of *Pelo malo* to explore not only the queer temporalities that haunt the traditional linear trajectory from childhood into adulthood but also how adult narratives that follow this trajectory carry out an active process of ghosting on non-normative children: a certain erasure that is enacted upon children who are deemed, as ghosts are, to be improperly inhabiting time or to be ‘out of joint’ with it (to borrow a term from *Hamlet* [Shakespeare c.1600] when explaining the presence of a ghost).

HOSTLY GAYNESS OR GROWING TOWARDS A QUESTION MARK

A body of academic research on *Pelo malo* is only beginning to surface in response to the film’s fairly recent availability. The most extensive analysis to date was written in Portuguese by Rodrigo Ribeiro Barreto, wherein he focuses largely ‘on the intersection between different vulnerabilities’ found in Junior but also in Marta as both characters are marginalized by hegemonic, state-sanctioned masculinity in intersecting ways. He examines the mother’s vital role in upholding patriarchy and imposing violent ideals of masculinity on her son, which Ivonete Pinto argues in her brief analysis of the film, is necessary for the struggling family, ‘in that country, in those conditions [...] so that he does not suffer the reaction of society’ (2014: 13). Chiara Santilli also offers a short article on the film in the Italian-language *Cineforum*, but what I find interesting in these three studies are the differences in how they describe Junior’s sexuality.

After providing several examples from the film that speak to the protagonist’s incipient same-sex desire, Barreto affirms that ‘to treat the question of Junior’s homosexuality as a mere hypothesis or possibility would be a disservice both to the writer and director as well as to the LGBTI community’s struggle for extensive and diversified visibility’ (2015, my translation). ‘Hypothesis’, however, is exactly the word used by Santilli when addressing the suspected ‘homosexuality of Junior’, even going so far as to posit whether the filmic evidence to support such a hypothesis should cause Junior to ‘immediately merit being labelled gay? (Since *gay*, as well as *hetero*, are labels and not simple ways of being)’ (2014: 48, my translation, original emphasis). Where Barreto builds his case for a homosexual reading of Junior by pointing to multiple

examples from the film (including the boy's apparent fascination with the handsome attendant of the neighbourhood kiosk), Santilli's list of evidence is comparatively and perhaps strategically small, although as I will discuss shortly, the two critics' interpretations may not be as diametrically opposed as they seem. Pinto's fleeting language on the subject, however, seems to uphold the notion of original heterosexuality when speaking of the corrective violence in which Marta engages 'so that the son doesn't turn homosexual' (2014: 12, my translation), although it is unclear whether she is speaking from her own perspective or assuming Marta's, however problematically.

These differences of opinion are indicative of wider-reaching differences in the film's reception, alluded to by the director in an interview in which she reports that, '[b]efore receiving the Concha de Oro [prize] of [the] San Sebastián [Film Festival], we received two special mentions, one from a gay group, and another from a Catholic group' (Bordonada 2014: 49, my translation). Where some viewers saw an important film about homophobia, others saw an indictment of racism, while still others saw a denunciation of Venezuelan politics. This diversity of interpretation can be partially attributed to *Pelo malo's* observational, neorealist aesthetic, its lack of a master narrative and its unique capacity to illustrate intersectionality as a concept so that different – although overlapping – systems of oppression become more salient for different viewers according to their own ideological geographies. What is most productive for the current study, however, is the debate amongst the aforementioned critics vis-à-vis the existence of Junior's (homo)sexuality. When conceptualizing the 'ghostly gayness in the figure of the child', Stockton asserts that such children appear:

[...] only as a fiction (as something many do not believe in). Such a child makes its own trouble for 'gay' precisely by floating about its meanings, whether it knows the word or not, which it well might. The ghostly gay child, as a matter of fact, makes *gay* far more liquid and labile than it has seemed in recent years, when queer theory has been rightfully critiquing it. Odd as it may seem, *gay* in this context, the context of the child, is the new *queer* – a term that touts its problems and shares them with anyone.

(2009: 4, original emphases)

While Barreto seems to be at odds with Santilli in terms of whether or not Junior's 'homosexuality' is an evident fact or a 'hypothesis', it is possible that Santilli's brief discussion of 'gay' and 'hetero' has more to do with a sensitivity to the fictitious nature of such labels rather than an aversion to the possibility of same-sex desire in Junior. Her rhetorical question about whether Junior as a character, at his age, merits (or 'deserves', depending on one's translation of *meritarsi*) the label 'gay' due solely to the limited insights into his nature that the camera affords based on his behaviour and perceived tendencies is a beneficial one for several reasons. First, it raises the spectre of a larger question about whether *anyone* at *any* age 'deserves' to be defined by their (perceived) sexual orientation. This is the 'trouble for 'gay' to which Stockton alludes in her observation of the child's potential usefulness for queer theory's problematization of the word. Why is it that the gay label comes across as cruel when applied to a child, but socially acceptable when applied to adults?

There are plenty of reasons involving contradictory notions of individual responsibility and other factors that I will continue to develop, but for the moment, I would like to discuss what Stockton refers to as 'the problem

of the child as a general idea. The child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back. It is ghostly, unreachable fancy' (Stockton 2009: 5). She and others (most notably, Lee Edelman 2004) have referred to the rhetorical child as a fantasy, but Stockton's entire premise is invested in the 'dense possibilities' for queer critique that are potentiated by an examination of this fantasy and its contradictions, one of these being that 'we cannot know the contours of children, who they are to themselves', and yet we must pretend that we do, acting in what we believe to be their best interest until the law considers them to be adults, legally responsible for their own existence.

Childhood, then, is a fiction: an ideal sustained in the collective imaginary through binary logic, however contradictory. Children are what adults are not and vice versa, their personhood delayed until they reach the age of maturity, although the fact that, in the eyes of the law, one can go to bed one night as a 17-year-old child and wake up the very next morning as an 18-year-old adult exposes the absurd nature of the fantasy upon which a nation organizes its citizenry. Another such binary that dictates the terms of citizenship is the one that defines homosexuals as that which heterosexuals are not, wherein the former are denied representation in the state's projected fantasy of ideal citizenship, imagined to be less deserving of its rights and privileges. In the fantasy of heteronormative citizenship, gays are often subjected to ghostly erasure from the narrative through varying degrees of violence: a violence that is justified as the consequence of the actions, decisions and behaviour of homosexual adults who are legally responsible for their own existence, and hence, their own desires.

Thus, gayness and childhood are enforced as separate – if not opposite – domains in the sociopolitical imaginary. Stockton affirms that

conservative Americans who trumpet family values juxtapose their children with 'homosexuals'. Of course, they do so in order to oppose them to each other, fighting the threat of homosexuality under the banner of 'what's good for children'. [...] Needless to say, they do not imagine there are children who are queer. Nor do they imagine that their concept of the child is by definition strange, and getting stranger, in the eyes of the grown-ups who define it.

(2009: 3)

It is not my intention here to conflate American homophobia with that of Venezuela. Irrespective of differences between cultural fantasies of childhood and sexuality, they both pretend that children such as Junior do not exist. Thus, his ghostliness is heavily layered, first as a child – as 'ghostly, unreachable fancy' of adult ideology – and then as a queer child: as 'a fiction (as something many do not believe in)'. Junior is banished from the heteronormative temporality of childhood wherein future citizenship is imagined to include procreation of the next generation (and thus, a nation's future, as described in Lee Edelman's reproductive futurism). In the binary logic of the heteronormative national fantasy, part of what graduates someone from childhood into adulthood is the procreation of one's own children, which is what inspired Freud to describe 'homosexuals' as 'arrested' in their development towards (re)productive sexuality. Stockton attributes this 'official-sounding diagnosis' as key in the 'presumed status' of homosexual adults 'as dangerous children, who remain children in part by failing to have their own' (2009: 22). If children must wait for a chronological benchmark before being granted all the rights and privileges of legal personhood, the road ahead for queer children remains even vaguer.

Santilli's question helps to further explain Stockton's 'backwards birth' and the system of holographic, ghostly projections that point forwards and backwards on one's biographic timeline, not only defining one's subjectivity, but constituting it. Junior's perceived tendencies in the here-and-now point towards the haunting future possibility of a gay man coming out of the closet: an action that is retroactive in its confirmation of having been a gay child in the past. Maintained in the sociopolitical imaginary as separate realms, Junior, as a suspected gay child in a society that denies the existence of such children, is damned to linger between the domains of childhood and homosexuality, held captive in a temporal rift or 'disjuncture' to use Derrida's term from *Specters of Marx* (1994).

It is this disjuncture with society's chrononormative (to borrow a term from Freeman 2010) timeline that Stockton describes as the sideways growth of queer children, using wording that is suggestive of temporal inertia associated with ghosts. 'One can remember desperately feeling there was simply nowhere to grow. What would become of the child one feared oneself to be?'. She describes queer childhood as

a frightening, heightened sense of growing towards a question mark [...] Or hanging in suspense – even wishing time would stop, or just twist sideways, so that one wouldn't have to advance to new or further scenes of trouble. Truly, one could feel that one more readily had a future with a word – *homo*, *faggot*, *gay* or *queer* – words so frequently used by kids – than with the objects or subjects of one's dreams.

(2009: 3, original emphases)

As a queer child whose place in society has not solidified into one of these 'adult' word categories – words whose re-signification for purposes of affirming identity and forming community almost always depends on a class privilege to which he has zero access – Junior's time is out of joint with the chrononormative timeline set forth for him in the national imaginary. This timeline, however, intersects with a highly racialized one that serves to further limit future possibilities for citizenship. In the stagnant time of *Pelo malo*, we gain insight into 'the objects' and 'subjects' of Junior's dreams as they collide with words and norms of the society in which he is trapped. We suffer *alongside* him as he pieces together that society identifies him as black and that this is 'malo', *alongside* the idea that there is something 'wrong' with him in terms of gender normativity. It does not matter whether he is gay or not or what his relationship is with this word because the mere suspicion of it – its spectre – is already provoking violence that is meant to make parts of his nature invisible: a process that constitutes a ghostly erasure of Junior from citizenship in Venezuelan society. I will argue that Rondón's portrayal of Junior as a ghostly non-citizen radically differs from the traditional use of the rhetorical child in recent Latin American cinema.

A DEPARTURE FROM THE OFTEN-USED CHILD IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA

A body of considerable scholarship has grown around the aforementioned uptick in films from Latin America centred on child protagonists, including a 2011 issue of *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas* introduced and edited by Carolina Rocha, and her 2012 and 2014 book collaborations with Georgia Seminot on

the subject. As pointed out by Rita de Grandis (2011), this deployment of the Historical Child (or Child as History) can be seen in many films dealing with twentieth-century neofascist dictatorships, such as *Kamchatka* (Piñeyro, 2002), *Machuca* (Wood, 2004), *O ano em que meus pais saíram de férias/The Year My Parents Went on Vacation* (Hamburger, 2006), etc., not to mention several films from Spain. While each film must take into consideration a wealth of complexities that are specific to the piece of history being reconstructed, the lens through which it is reconstructed speaks to a present political desire to remember the past in a specific way, even as the use of child protagonists is intended to mask or at least mitigate any perceived political intentionality.¹

Each of these films is told in a chronologically uncomplicated manner, with adult filmmakers looking back at dictatorships that they experienced as children through the eyes of child protagonists so as to lower the ideological stakes of directing the nation's gaze back to a controversial time in its recent past. Even *Cidade de Deus/City of God* (Meirelles and Lund, 2002) is a generational look back – a reflection on the child the adult storyteller *used to be* – and *Central do Brasil/Central Station* (Salles, 1998) ultimately places the imperiled child safely into the arms of the male blood relatives who will lead him on the path towards becoming the man he was destined to become. In all of these films, the future of the child protagonist becomes comfortably settled by the end of the film (with the notable exception of Machuca himself as a working-class child of colour in post-coup Chile). As adults looking back, their future citizenship is resolved because we know what becomes of them after the diegesis ends. Using the rhetorical figure of the child to represent past violence is in some ways less complicated than attempting to portray present violence. *Pelo malo* is somewhat unique in that it refuses us this distance, this temporal perspective, focusing instead on delay and forcing us to confront our linear, sense-making processes and narratives.

I say somewhat unique because a similar cinematic strategy is employed in *XXY* (Puenzo, 2007) and even more so by Julia Solomonoff in *El último verano de la Boyita/The Last Summer of La Boyita* (2009), as analysed by Vinodh Venkatesh in his important new monograph *New Maricón Cinema* (2016). Venkatesh observes that in many contemporary films such as *La otra familia/The Other Family* (Loza, 2011), the perspective of the child serves to re-inscribe the neo-liberal status quo as reality, leaving unproblematized Anglo-American notions of gay identity, 'prepackaged' as what 'falls under [Ignacio] Sánchez Prado's identification of what the middle and upper classes [of Mexico] aspire to' (Venkatesh 2016: 176). As an exception to this neo-liberal pattern, Jorgelina, the child protagonist in *El último verano*, draws viewers into complicated and often contradictory processes of subject formation instead of serving as an outward reflection of changing societal norms as embodied by child characters in other films. 'She is, instead, a truly decentring point of view and entry point into a broader exploration of body, gender, and sexual pluralities' (Venkatesh 2016: 190).

Venkatesh concludes his book by briefly pointing to *Pelo malo* as a similar example of a departure from 'recent neoliberal Maricón films' as part of what he proposes as *New Maricón Cinema*, highlighting Rondón's efforts 'to complicate and problematize rather than sermonize' (Venkatesh 2016: 197). The present study responds to Venkatesh's implicit call for further research on *Pelo malo* and posits temporal critique as a productive approach to examining not only 'body, gender, and sexual pluralities', but also the way in which race informs these intersectional processes of subject formation. I will argue that

1. Jordana Blejmar (2017) has recently published a monograph wherein she examines a series of contemporary films by a rising generation of filmmakers who make a significant departure from the child-as-embodiment-of-history body of films that I have outlined here. She argues that emerging filmmakers are employing child-like playfulness as a rhetorical strategy for engaging in processes of historical memory with young people who did not experience the 1976–83 dictatorship first hand.

2. For example, Jara Yáñez attributes 'the lack of dramatic strength' to a certain 'weakness' in both the 'script' and the 'directing' in his critique of *Pelo malo* (2014: 49, my translation).

these processes are further complicated in the case of the film's prepubescent child protagonist, whose lack of autonomy over his own body and the narratives surrounding it serves to underscore the ghostly nature of the ideological discourses that are projected onto said body.

PELO MALO: EXAMPLES OF GHOSTLY TEMPORALITIES

Just as ghosts represent snags in the temporal order of stories, the narrative in *Pelo malo* seems to go nowhere: a stagnation that can be read as an indictment of the political status quo, but that can be read in theoretical terms as even more subversive. This insistence on delay may be responsible for some of the criticism that the film has received vis-à-vis the storyline's lack of progression or dead moments in its visual narrative. Dismissed as rookie 'mistakes' by some critics,² I will argue that these moments are quite intentional in the way they deliberately work against linear temporality, suspending time to draw adult spectators back into the 'sideways' temporality of a childhood that they have already straightened out and made sense of within the linear narrative of their own lives. Rather than resulting from amateur writing, the film's dead space – both temporal in terms of the silences that saturate the film's narrative and spatial in terms of the sense of inescapable stagnation communicated by the film's visual framing of the urban landscape and the suffocating confines of individual apartments – is designed as a house of horrors, ominous in both its enclosure and its foreclosure on viable ways out for its inhabitants.

The very first scene of the film perfectly joins these two concepts: the sideways temporality of childhood – especially queer childhood – and the ghostly nature of rhetorical children as they are suspended in narrative. The film begins in the home of an upper-middle-class woman, where Marta has just been hired to clean. When they reach the upstairs bathroom, Junior offers to help her. She instructs him to fill up the jacuzzi with warm water and scrub the sides with a rag. 'But please don't go getting your clothes wet, okay?'. After she leaves to clean elsewhere, he does as he is told and gets to work, but quickly finds himself splashing his shirt with water. To keep his clothes



Figure 1: Junior floats in the jacuzzi, suspended in time, lingering unproductively in ways that do not go unpunished. Mariana Rondón, Pelo malo/Bad Hair, 2013. Venezuela. © Sudaca Films.

dry, he strips down to his underwear and submerges himself in the giant tub, where he can continue scrubbing without getting his clothes wet. The novelty of being in a jacuzzi, however, soon overtakes him, and he puts down the rag and allows himself to float, weightless like a ghost suspended in time, lost in the joy of being a kid in a tub. The white upper-middle-class homeowner happens upon the scene and, with vulgar disdain complains, 'Damn it! The kid is in my jacuzzi!'. The cleaning job is over, and Marta is once again unemployed.

While it may seem like either a forced or a facile connection to compare Junior's floating in the jacuzzi with that of a ghost, what I would like to address here beyond the mere visual similarities is the fact that the child's moments of suspension in the water are deemed unproductive and are subsequently grounds for banishing him from this particular realm of social order. Childhood is full of these moments – these lingerings, these delays in one's development towards becoming productive members of society, these sideways moments when the impulse to enjoy for the sake of enjoying overpowers what one 'should' be doing with one's time – and while viewers may smile sympathetically as Junior gives into temptation with childish abandon, being a kid in a jacuzzi is not a pardonable offense for this child of colour, this son of a working-class single mother. His time in this house must be productive or it will be taken away. Even as a child, there is no place for him in this economy (or his mother, for that matter) unless he proves himself to be useful to the system, according to its terms and its timeline.

There is another element to this scene that speaks to the director's insistence on delay as a narrative strategy: one that does not let the viewer off the hook so easily when it comes to feeling morally superior to the white woman who scolds Junior for enjoying his time in the jacuzzi. The close-up of the 9-year-old enjoying the weightlessness of this suspended, liquid space in which he can fully spread himself out horizontally (i.e. sideways) lasts for an uncomfortable amount of time: over 40 seconds. As previously mentioned, something I am arguing for in this analysis is a deliberate denial of distance on the part of the director, both temporal (in terms of denying the linear progression of other twenty-first-century Latin American films centred around children) and sensory. The camera is placed uneasily close to Junior's face and it stays there as he relishes his time in the jacuzzi. As if placed underwater themselves, viewers are engulfed by the amplified sounds of every splash of water and every breath that Junior makes.

Venkatesh notes that 'the audile tactility of the image alienates the viewer and orients him or her to the protagonist's body and subject position within the narrative and sets the tone for an affective transmission that poses an ethical approximation to difference' (2016: 197). I would add to this that, on the one hand, this strategy can be seen as an attempt to interpellate viewers into remembering the experience of being a kid in a bathtub, drawing them into the horizontal, non-productive temporality of childhood. On the other, it forces viewers into acknowledging Junior as a fully human and therefore *desiring* being rather than a child-yet-to-be-real-person, even if he has not fully realized what those desires are or what they are supposed to mean in a society that defines individuals by what and especially whom they desire, holding them personally responsible simply *for* desiring or even being suspected of desiring. In this particular scene, Junior is held personally responsible for giving into the desire to enjoy the jacuzzi, although throughout the remainder of the film, viewers witness the many instances in which various adults

suspect Junior of being the type of boy who is inclined to desire other boys. They hold him accountable for it through mockery and disdain, holding him responsible for existing as he is: for being a certain way that he has yet to even identify or understand.

This is partially what Stockton means when she refers to a queer child's 'backward birth'. As apprentices of the social order that will define their citizenship, children cannot be entrusted with the responsibility, legal or otherwise, of representing themselves. They have not yet reached an age when they can agree to or negotiate with the terms of their identity. As students of the system, their job is to absorb information and begin piecing it together in a way that creates a coherent trajectory towards their future selves: a road map for growing up. Several examples of this process at work are offered in the first nine minutes of the film, which consist of a sequence of images and dialogues that give the viewer an overview of Junior, his mother Marta and their current situation.

After being banished from the house with the jacuzzi, Marta and Junior are riding the bus home. He begins to hum a song that she does not recognize, and she looks at him half bewildered – not recognizing the song and wondering where in the world he picked it up – and half disgusted by the boy's sing-songy disposition, ultimately leaving him to sit alone as she sternly takes a seat a few rows up. She is clearly upset about losing out on the cleaning job due to her son's behaviour, but she also seems to be troubled by the mystery that her son represents for her. Beyond the general maternal puzzle of 'Who is this little stranger I gave birth to?' or 'Where do kids get the stuff they repeat?' – beyond the unknowability of 'the contours of children' discussed by Stockton – lies the question that Marta seems to be silently asking herself in this moment: 'Why does he repeat *that*? Why is he receptive to *that* when other little boys aren't interested in singing?'

Junior's inclination towards singing rather than other activities deemed more gender appropriate, whether constructive or destructive, is the first in a series of what one might describe as Junior's tendencies (while winking at Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick 1993). Singing is just as pleasure-oriented and unproductive as floating in a jacuzzi, and Marta – at the end of her rapidly fraying rope in terms of economic options – is beginning to suspect that Junior's non-productive present is foreshadowing a non-(re)productive future. Based on the clues of the present, whatever it is that Junior will be when he is a real person (and not just a kid) is not looking very promising. Whatever Junior is picking up on as a 9-year-old – his interests, his tendencies – is haunting Marta's imagination, which brings us back to Stockton's ghostly child and the fear that these little things that Marta keeps noticing are preludes to a future coming out. This is the backward birth described by Stockton: the self-identifying gay son who utters the word that projects an adult identity – a sexual identity – back onto a roadmap of childhood desires, tendencies and other prefigurations.

When they get home, Junior meets up with his female best friend, who remains nameless throughout the film, and on *The Internet Movie Database*. The two of them live in the same massive housing project and pass the time – their shared sideways time as children who have yet to reach the age at which they should, in theory, become more productive with their time as adult citizens – on the balcony of their building, playing a game of 'I spy' based on things, people and activities they spot in the building across the way.



Figure 2: 'A black what?'. Junior learns the grammar of social subjectivity and how people are sorted into boxes against a symbolically boxed-in urban backdrop in *Pelo malo*.

JUNIOR: Cigar.

GIRL: Oh, that's easy. She's always waiting for her husband.

JUNIOR: It's not her husband. It's her son.

GIRL: But I saw them kissing each other.

In this dialogue, both children are engaged in a learning process at work: a solidifying mastery of the social conventions that dictate roles, behaviours and relationships. A man and woman can kiss on a balcony, but one kind of kiss is socially appropriate for mother–son relationships and a different kind of kiss is acceptable for a wife–husband relationship. The game quickly continues and it is the girl's turn, which involves another lesson in social grammar:

GIRL: A black.

JUNIOR: [*Scowling because a simple colour is not specific enough a clue when playing 'I spy' and he feels she is cheating by being deliberately difficult.*] A black what?

GIRL: [*In an explicative, matter-of-fact tone.*] A black man.

JUNIOR: Ah.

We actually witness Junior learning that he lives in a society in which 'black' can be used as a noun: that skin colour can determine a type of person. With this new information, we can imagine that he begins to wonder whether he is *that* type of person, as already insinuated by the film's title and the urgent need that he feels to straighten out his 'bad hair'. He is already beginning to put two and two together through a violent process of social conditioning that cannot be separated from an intersecting process that is telling him that his hair and skin are not all that are 'bad' about him.

There is one scene in particular that illustrates this painful learning process at work: this raw, vulnerable figuring out of what is allegedly wrong with his nature so that he can grow up rather than sideways. It is foreshadowed by a

quick scene without dialogue that occurs along one of the long walkways that wrap around the massive housing project where Marta and Junior live. Several similarly aged boys are aggressively breakdancing to English-language rap/dance music that is blaring: 'Grab a drink, grab a blunt, grab a bitch, yeah fuck! Fuck! Fuck!'. Junior and his female best friend look on, in close proximity but as discouraged outsiders, as the other boys perform for and to each other not just how cool they are, but the degree to which they have been successfully socialized into the cult of masculinity: one based on violent consumerism that subjugates women as just one more commodity to be used to a pleasure-producing end, despite the questionable likelihood that any of these 9-year-olds understand the lyrics of the song that they are dancing to. In a twenty-first-century Venezuela that has so far been defined by a political rejection of US-dominated global capitalism, irony is not lost on the fact that this English-language anthem of misogynistic consumerism remains attractive for Venezuelan masculinity, suggesting as mentioned in my introduction a certain disenchantment with the masculinist Left's rhetorical mission of building an egalitarian society.

Junior feels the beat differently than the other boys do, however, and responds to it by closing his eyes, extending both arms peaceably above his head, and swaying them from side to side, floating like a ghostly spectator to the social order before him in the stagnant air of this urban enclosure, present but not present as he seems to be caught between different dimensions, imagining an entirely different venue. Junior's alternate interpretation of the song's beat suddenly causes the scene to be much more reminiscent of a gay rave: the heavy beat driving arms carelessly, liberatingly up into the air rather than aggressively towards an object to be conquered.

Marta scowls as she observes this contrast, seeming to wonder why her son does not make productive use of childhood by socializing with the other boys, thus making 'proper use' of male privilege by securing a future place for himself in the 'good old boys club' that not only dominates the Venezuelan economy, but stipulates its rules. In such an economy, a woman's access to income is designed to be contingent upon her subordination to a man: a storyline that plays itself out in Marta's life throughout the film's duration. The film suggests that for her own long-term economic



*Figure 3: Junior floats in the background as the neighbour boys aggressively perform urban masculinity in the foreground in *Pelo malo*.*

well-being, Marta is counting on the fact that she has a son to take care of her now that she is a widow, although she is increasingly doubtful about whether Junior, despite having been born a biological male, is capable of properly embodying the ideological assumptions of hegemonic masculinity: of properly inhabiting its timeline and proving himself useful for future economic ambitions.

There is even a scene in which Junior asks Marta a few questions about his late father in front of the television while she cross stitches. Sensing her solitude, he moves to her side of the couch, lovingly caresses her hair and promises that 'I'm going to take care of you until you're old'. In their conversation about her late husband, Junior perceives that Marta longs for a male caregiver, but the boy is still in the process of learning, slowly and painfully, that he 'fails' (to borrow from Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* [2011]) to embody this ideal. As he touches her hair, she looks up from her cross stitching in bewilderment and frustration with her son's perceived failure. Knowing that she has been unsuccessful in her attempts to even get an interview for her previous job as a security guard, he goes so far as to put a barrette in her hair:

JUNIOR: How pretty! Like that you can ask for the job and they'll give it to you.

MARTA: [*Tearing the barrette out of her hair, accusatorily. This was not the help she had in mind.*] Where did you get this? [*Silence.*] Where did you get this?

JUNIOR: It's the girl's.

MARTA: [*Angrily.*] Give it back. Sit over there! [*Gesturing violently to the other side of the couch.*]

By rejecting Junior's solidarity and ordering him back to 'his' side of the couch, Marta re-inscribes the gender divide, banishing him from the realm of emotional sensitivity to or identification with females and in doing so, refuses his body the permission to follow his spirit. Junior remains suspended, then, both in the sense of being banished from a certain space, and in the sense of being left hanging, without a space to touch down in, caught between the gender divide.

While Marta's messaging is clear in the scene that I just described – her staunch rejection of a heavily gendered object – the target of her gender policing is less concrete the evening immediately following Junior's improvised dancing on the balcony of their building. In this scene, Marta has been drinking in the kitchen alone after failing to secure a rendezvous with her former boss. We later infer that her dismissal from the highly gendered role of security guard has to do with an initial refusal to give into her male supervisor's unwanted sexual advances: a decision that she eventually reverses in violent, heartbreaking fashion near the film's end to put food on the table. An entire article could be written solely on the many ways in which Marta suffers the direct consequences of gender normativity at the same time that she herself upholds and enforces this violent logic with Junior.

For the present analysis, however, this scene will serve to highlight Junior's ghostly suspension in time, shrouded in fear and uncertainty: the 'question mark' alluded to by Stockton. After getting out of bed to find his mother

drinking and smoking to calm her anxieties about the hopelessness of her current situation, Junior asks her:

JUNIOR: What happened?

MARTA: 'What happened?' [*Mocking his tone, then strutting up to the doorway in an effeminate manner.*] 'What happened?'. Why do you dance like this? [*Extending her hands in the air and seemingly to float carelessly, as she observed Junior doing earlier that afternoon.*]

JUNIOR: Because I feel like it.

Marta then begins to improvise a chant as if it were the chorus of a popular song, moving rhythmically and aggressively towards Junior but smiling – incessantly, eerily – as she repeats his words: 'Because I feel like it! Because I feel like it!'. He remains petrified and expressionless, lost in a semiotic 'haze' (to reuse one of Stockton's words) about his mother's emotional state and her intentions. She draws him in by smiling more, gesturing a 'come here' with her hands, and interjecting the inviting command, '[d]ance!' between refrains, seeming to say '[g]o ahead! It's okay to let loose and be yourself here. I accept and celebrate you'. Once he reciprocates her smile, takes her hands and joins in the dance, however, her facial expression changes, her jaw clenches and while maintaining the aforementioned rhythm, she switches to the violently interrogative 'Why do you feel like it?! Why do you feel like it?!' as she tightens her grip on his hands and angrily jerks his arms around. He is eventually able to free himself by pushing back and causing her to lose her balance in her intoxicated state.

In these 60 seconds and with no dialogue other than the refrain in question, Rondón manages to communicate to the viewer the 'frightening, heightened sense of growing towards a question mark [...] Or hanging in suspense – even wishing time would stop, or just twist sideways, so that one wouldn't have to advance to new or further scenes of trouble' (Stockton 2009: 3). Of course there are many more examples of Junior's natural incompatibility with the normative timelines set before him, including highly racialized ones that further foreclose on the possibility of spaces for him to grow. Literally framing this entire reflection on futurity and citizenship is the ongoing motif of *Pelo malo*, which is Junior and his best friend's quest to get a professional picture taken of them for the school ID cards that will be mandatory for their fast-approaching school year. The children's desire for a photo that reflects who they imagine themselves to be is in varying degrees of conflict with who the state imagines them to be. The purpose of these cards is for the state to identify them as future citizens – as apprentices to Venezuelan social order – and the negotiations that occur around how these photos will be shot is not inconsequential. Junior's friend eventually gets more or less what she wants in the end because her mother has the money to pay for the photo and because her fantasy for herself – that of a beauty queen in a country made famous by such pageants – is compatible with the national fantasy for white, cis-gendered females, even as she is cruelly heckled by the boys in her neighbourhood for failing to properly embody ideals of feminine beauty on her way to get her picture taken, dressed up as a princess.

Junior's fantasy, however, is never even acknowledged by the photographer, who ignores his desire to be dressed as a 'singer with straight hair' and, placing a red beret on his head, pronounces definitively that his photo 'is of a

leftenant coronel. You'll look just like this one', pointing to a photo of an Afro-Venezuelan boy holding a machine gun, photoshopped in front of a parade of tanks on a flag-lined boulevard. The state, then, identifies Junior as black, and consequently fantasizes a future of military service: a position whose job description includes dying when necessary. In other words, the possibility of a future ghosting is already imagined on Junior's timeline based simply on how society sees him. This racialized death fantasy also includes a higher likelihood of ghosting by gang violence, as expressed by Marta when she is discussing the possibility of leaving him with his paternal grandmother Carmen, who presumably lives in a predominantly Afro-Venezuelan neighbourhood:

MARTA: If I leave him with you, they'll kill him [*gesturing towards the street*] in a couple of years.

CARMEN: No. He's different. He doesn't want weapons. He just wants to be pretty and get dressed up.

Carmen believes that effeminacy will be his saving grace, and that she can even groom him to find a highly specialized niche in Venezuela's socio-economic fabric as a flamboyant black entertainer. The fact that she uses a vinyl record to revive the ghost of Henry Stephen as a viable example to follow – even having Junior learn the song 'Limón de limonero' by heart – speaks to her own failure to keep up with time, her outdated resources doomed to failure when attempting to negotiate with the violently pigeon-holed possibilities for Afro-Venezuelan males of a certain persuasion in today's Venezuela.

Junior senses that he is being manipulated by Carmen and resists the idea of having to live with her. While Carmen encourages Junior's obsession with fixing his supposedly bad hair, Marta is so set against it that she ends up issuing him an ultimatum near the film's end: the only way he can avoid being sent to live with his grandmother is by shaving his head. He takes the automatic razor that she has just purchased and asks, before shaving, 'And when it grows back?'. She shakes her head no as if his hair had nowhere to grow but sideways, and he proceeds to shave off his hair, his eyes empty. This emptiness follows him into the next and final scene, where he is standing on the roof of his school, his classmates singing the Venezuelan national anthem while he remains shorn and silent, excluded from the ideals of citizenship rhetorically upheld in the song that engulfs him, staring nowhere with dead eyes, a ghostly shell of his former bright-eyed, animated, sing-songy self, nowhere for his hair to grow and nowhere for him to grow, 'arrested' and trapped within the enclosure of the suffocating urban landscape that surrounds him, institutions that foreclose not only on the possibility of being a queer child of colour, but even the possibility of having been one, after the fact: tall, seemingly unmovable man-made constructions that deny his soul the materiality that it longs for.

If the idea of children is a ghostly one to begin with, and queer children are doubly so, queer children of colour have even fewer spaces (if any) in which to imagine themselves eventually materializing as social subjects. It is this exile from normative timelines of citizenship, this permanent banishing of one's spirit from one's body, this erasure of the fantasy that one has for one's future self, that Rondón manages to convey through her denial of temporal perspective, of breathing room for her ghostly child protagonist. By adopting delay as both an aesthetic and a narrative strategy, she manages to provide glimpses



Figure 4: A recently shorn Junior appears as a ghost of his former self, no longer singing, present but absent from the ideals of citizenship surrounding him in *Pelo malo*.

into the story of a queer child of colour that would otherwise be untellable on its own terms while simultaneously working against the traditional storytelling process, thus exposing the normative mechanisms – temporal and otherwise – that serve as the ideological underpinnings for narratives of becoming that are projected onto children as citizens-in-waiting. For some, as illustrated in the film’s final image, the wait is indefinite.

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