

# **WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY**

## **INTERVIEWS**

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### **An Interview with María Mercedes Gómez**

**April 11, 2011 via Skype**

**María Mercedes Gómez:** My academic career began with philosophy. For many years, I devoted myself to the field of epistemology. My work was focused on Kant, but simultaneously, I always had a great interest in literature, political philosophy, psychoanalysis and cinematography. At a given moment, I dedicated myself to political philosophy, and at a later stage, to legal philosophy, all this with a strong interest in the way in which cultural models, literature, films, and to a certain extent music, have a bearing on the construction of subjectivity. This led me to ponder on the legal issue, and more specifically, to inquire into the spaces of justice related to groups that had not been traditionally represented in those abstract images of subjectivity.

I approached legal issues from the feminist perspective. I went from working at a Faculty of Philosophy to doing so at a Faculty of Law. I studied criminology and I became concerned with the problem of social justice and of the way in which the law, and legal and political philosophy, approached the issue of women and the spaces of discrimination and equality for women. My introduction to the LGBT issues, or the issue of diverse sexualities (I never know very well how to refer to these kinds of spaces, because when one speaks of diverse sexualities, one is thinking about something that is still normative, and I would not want to refer in this way to what we do, which I believe is related to a plurality of forms of sexuality), was the result of having studied the problem of women; justice for women and discrimination against them led me to seek a formal education in the area of gender issues and feminist theory in New York. It was there that the issue opened before me in its full scope.

**Carlos Motta:** When did you begin to link justice and sexuality, not only women's sexuality but also that of homosexuals?

**MMG:** The first time was when I arrived in New York and I started to perceive the limits of identity politics. I realized the significance that the affirmation of certain identities has had historically; from the theoretical point of view, I found this limited.

**CM:** What are those limits?

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**MMG:** When one affirms an identity, something is always excluded, and the question about history must be the question about that which is invariably excluded in the inevitable affirmation processes. This is what I learned from deconstruction, from reading Judith Butler; this is the methodology I employ in my work. To acknowledge that from the point of view of the construction of political ideals, identities are necessary, but every time one affirms something, something else is left out, and that which is left out is not something that necessarily requires to be affirmed in an absolute way. What is worthwhile in that process is the question that makes evident the problem of injustice, the problem of the 'other' who was excluded.

**CM:** Might we say that the political models that have been used to further the causes of sexual minorities have been rooted in these identity politics? How do you approach the official politics of LGBT organizations in relation to justice, given that justice always appears to be normative and heterosexual, and its limits are not questioned from another perspective?

**MMG:** I have a strategic approach; I also approach these politics as an activist. I have been linked to *Colombia Diversa* for the past five years through an intense work involving an interest in and support of the processes of recognition of rights in Colombia. I believe people must have options. Many times, those of us who have the luxury and the privilege of having a theoretical argument to fight against the construction of identities do not need immediate rights. It is much easier to say that one does not agree with gay marriage because it repeats the traditional pattern if one does not need health insurance, or protecting one's children, or a residency visa. I always take into account what the scope of my political stance is at every moment, and what I can do to make sure that my political stance does not repeat or generate a form of injustice. Marriage generates a series of individual rights that are valid and necessary for people who do not have other privileges, and in that sense I think the option must exist. The consequence may be that instead of undergoing a radical transformation, society will move along lines that will continue to be unfair for many: for example, having access to certain individual rights only through marriage. But since the space for radical transformation does not seem to be a possibility in the short term, I think that one must work strategically so that the people who want and need this right may exercise it.

**CM:** One of the most frequent criticisms leveled against this project comes from the *queer* Left interested in the most radical transformations. They stress the fact that marriage generates benefits to a white middle-class and not to racial minorities, those people who will not have access to rights even if they do get married, because the couple does not have these rights, either. They conceive this criticism as an opportunity to exercise a solidarity activism and question the limits of discrimination not in a utopian or theoretical way, but through militancy.

**MMG:** I agree; this criticism shows solidarity with the fight against class discrimination and other forms of discrimination. Queer theory is a critique of capitalism insofar as it dismantles the redistribution of resources, which has rooted in the affirmation of a victim identity. Wendy Brown has described this wonderfully in "States of Injury." Butler, too, has developed multiple spaces based on this. Queer theory should be a critique of the values of capitalism insofar as unrecognized sexuality easily becomes a privileged space in capitalist spaces.

It is a critique that I accept, but only in the context of a very localized reading, in very specific countries; that is, I think Beatriz Preciado's profound criticism of identity politics in Europe and the United States is not comparable to the criticism that might apply to Latin America, where

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actually the problem of sexuality is not, by far, the main problem associated to discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion. In Colombia, if you are an economically prosperous person, race and sexual orientation do not disappear altogether; there may be a glass ceiling in other respects, but it is more manageable. Anyone who has this kind of privilege, whether of an economic, social or cultural nature, will agree with me. I am a person who has been out of the closet in spaces that are considered elite spaces in Colombia, and I do not think I could say that I felt discriminated based on my sexual orientation. I think this has to do with the fact that I have a social and cultural capital that reduces the historical conditions that fostered discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation.

The eradication of identity politics is interesting, very promising, but I think it must be based on very localized work, moments and problems. In Colombia, marriage is not a condition of social justice, it is true, but it is not so for many people, not only for gay or lesbian couples. However, the space where we do in fact hold a debate on a transformative process involves the right to adopt. The reforms generated by same-sex couple marriages do not produce any changes in society; they consolidate a given value; they reproduce the liberal model of marriage and family, and there is absolutely no type of threat to what Butler has called the idea of *Nation*, which is actually jeopardized by adoption. Adoption renders what is happening in Latin America evident: Some statistics say that 20 percent of the families are traditional families; the rest are other kinds of families, not necessarily homoparental ones. They can be extensive families, or there can be two mothers, or two fathers, or single mothers or fathers. Adoption would imply State justification for something that is already happening, and this generates an unspeakable anxiety, because what is at stake is the notion of social cohesion, the notion of Nation, the notion of a country's "identity."

**CM:** I would like you to talk about the theoretical framework you have chosen to use in your project on violence based on prejudice and, more specifically, about the way in which you articulate the concepts of discrimination and exclusion.

**MMG:** The way in which I approached this issue is the following: I realized that the notion of discrimination has been systematically employed, especially from the legal point of view, as synonymous with exclusion; they are used indiscriminately. What I wanted to show was that in every society one may identify different types of prejudices which have to do with what a society considers viable, unspeakable or unacceptable from any point of view. I realized this has to do with the difference between discrimination and exclusion, because discrimination is the kind of practice that takes place when you accept to some extent the presence of an 'other,' provided that this 'other' remains where he/she is, which to my own judgment is a place of inferiority.

This is clear in the context of domestic violence; the notion that one of those persons be a child, a woman, or an elderly person, must be put in place; that is, there is a person who has control, and it must be possible for that control to remain unimpeachable and untouched. The notion of discrimination (maintaining the 'other' as inferior) functions like Hegel's master-slave dialectic: The person who is in a position of inferiority must be shown that he/she must continue to be inferior, but at the same time one must make sure that they never lose the wish to be so. A social condition that holds a promise of transformation, of some change, must be generated, but every time the group aspires to materialize that promise, a violent gesture must be made that forces the other to remain an inferior.

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The idea that women are equal, or that Afro-Colombians have all the same political and legal rights as non Afro-Colombian citizens in Colombia is an example of this. Every time that there is a moment of appropriation of these rights, there is a resurgence of gestures that reduces it. In this case, violence is not only physical; there are forms of intersectionality, for example of class and race, of race and sexual orientation, through which shaping messages are conveyed aimed at maintaining the 'other' as inferior.

The same happens in the case of alternative or LGBT sexualities. Specific moments must be identified, because there are groups and categories that have historically suffered discrimination, but later they have suffered both discrimination and exclusion. Exclusion has to do with the fact that there are certain kinds of values that are incompatible with a society. A society is a dynamic entity that has multiple ways of looking; then, when I refer to a society, I am referring to the institutions that define what a society is.

Exclusion has to do with the notion that there are certain kinds of individuals or groups that are involved in a constant process of rejection, of silencing, or of expulsion from the political and social space. The notion of exclusion I employ does not have to do with being marginalized from certain rights, but with not being named, with a space that cannot be seen; it has to do with *invisibilization*, with thinking that what cannot be seen does not exist; with generating a space to question oneself on what is unfair and has not even had the chance to be voiced because every time it is voiced, it relocates and shifts to the space of what can be seen, since that is the only way.

**CM:** The invisibilization of lesbians that you address in terms of discrimination and exclusion is not limited to a single sphere of violence; rather, it is something that is much more present in relation to lesbians as a category within the spectrum of alternative identities. Could you tell us something about this generalized invisibilization of the lesbian and the reason for it?

**MMG:** Lesbians become more visible every day; for instance, when they enter into a commercial circuit – I am thinking about Ellen Degeneres' success in American culture. But, of course, there is a fight for gender identity going on, insofar as the social, legal, economic and political spaces of transformation have not yet opened up to sexual diversity. In this respect, lesbians run a greater risk of being invisibilized, because there is no social referent that may have symbolized feminine desire without that desire being referred to the masculine. There is a woman in Germany who has produced an interesting work on violence against lesbians, there are some surveys, but I do not know of any study capable of illustrating the scope of specific violence against lesbians, particularly in Latin America.

Violence against lesbians may remain hidden behind domestic violence or behind violence against gay men. I have defined it thus: Either there is an exclusion of an instrumental or methodological type, which is related to the way in which information is gathered, who is selected to answer the questions, what the spaces of aggression are; or there is a normative exclusion: The issue involving that which desire among women jeopardizes is not mentioned. It also has to do with the fact that lesbians are much less visible, not only from the point of view of academic works but also from the perspective of public activities.

**CM:** This has something to do with the self-visibilization of those minority groups. Independently of the fact that they are society's protegés, gay men have mobilized, they have created spaces.

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It seems to me that lesbian women have preferred to gather together in much more discreet spaces.

**MMG:** I have not worked on the subject, but I am under the impression that, at least in Colombia, lesbian women's work spaces or spaces of public articulation have been much more limited due to a class factor. Lesbians who have gone out into the streets and have achieved political articulations belong to the middle-class and to the working-classes. In Colombia, upper-class lesbians have been women who have made the decision to keep their lives private; they have not politicized their option, for whatever reasons it may be.

**CM:** In a conversation I had with an activist from Iran, he remarked that the question of sexuality in Iran is a subject that is not mentioned, but that lesbian women, since they are, *per se*, second-class citizens, prefer to keep their lives and their relationships invisible.

**MMG:** I once heard a professor propose the idea that not coming out of the closet may be a political option of resistance. I think this also has to do with the fact that the spaces of discrimination and power are so clearly masculine in Colombia that the costs of putting up a fight of that kind are frightening, and many times, fright is translated into "I am not interested." Remaining outside the political sphere has to do with the fear of losing privileges and with the fear of the consequences of being categorized. This has to do with something that any person who has publicly come out of the closet in Latin America can understand. For example, I am a person who studied Philosophy, and I hold a Ph.D. in Political Theory; coming out of the closet, I lose part of my other identities, even those I can be more interested in; I lose them when the identity that prevails, the way I am perceived from the outside is as a lesbian; this has to do with the external imposition of an identity.

**CM:** Once again the idea of violence based on prejudice, even if it is not physical.

**MMG:** Totally so. Violence does not have to do with the identities of individuals, because it is impossible to adjudicate these identities; nobody self-defines him or herself necessarily and definitively in one way or another. Identity is something that loads the other's gaze, this was also expressed in a fantastic way by one of the pioneers of queer theory, Eve Sedgwick, in "The Epistemology of the Closet." It is the gaze of the attacker, of the perpetrator, or of the one who bears the prejudice that imposes identity.

**CM:** Why is the lesbian one a special category of exclusion?

**MMG:** I have stolen an expression by Slavoj Žižek to say that lesbians are perceived as "thieves of enjoyment." I use this expression to indicate that when a society defines itself and identifies itself with heterosexual spaces, it is generating the notion that privileges are also distributed in a binary way, and therefore any kind of threat to that potential distribution of privileges generates a deep anxiety, and anxiety ends up becoming violent. Why are lesbians radically threatening? Because they make evident something that has historically been naturalized: That men have the power, and that masculine power is associated to the capacity to choose a woman. Gayle Rubin has also expressed this in her classic text on the sex/gender system: "Being male is defined, among other things, by a capacity to pick out women." But it is not restricted to that; it is defined by what is symbolically implied by the pronouncement of the law that, from a Lacanian point of view, consists in possessing a phallus. Although actually nobody possesses one, it is evident

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that the historical interpretation has been that it is characteristic of men. Such belief results in the capacity to establish the law (that sex is binary); this law is not a definitive law, it is not the sole law, yet people live as if it were. Therefore, desire among women calls into question the naturalization of power, of heterosexual power, not only of men but of masculinity understood thus.

**CM:** What have the strategies of radical lesbians to oppose this power been? Has it been the so-called separatist lesbians, who protect their bodies from the gaze of men? Can you refer to the way in which they can protect themselves from that violence, albeit in a symbolical way?

**MMG:** What I am telling you sounds a lot like the 1970s, but I am not talking about separatist lesbians, although I respect their moment; I do not consider this that I am telling you to be exclusive of a historical moment. It is queer theory that achieves the dismantling of binary gender relations, that puts up the most radical and interesting resistance. Queer theory has shown us that differences are imposed by power; Derrida showed this through his concept of deconstruction; the difference is material, it is real, it has real, dramatic material consequences, but it is not natural, it is imposed, and depending on the way in which one incorporates into these articulations, one repeats it or succeeds in combatting this difference. This is the source of the great resistance, but the question is: If one must survive in a world that has not dismantled everything in an immediate way, with which articulations will I become associated and with which will I not?

**CM:** When you say that resistance comes from the queer theory, are you also referring to the resistance to those fixed identities, to a more fluid understanding of categories?

**MMG:** You may find all this that I am telling you in the proposals of the great pioneers of queer theory. I am not telling you anything new; what my study on violence has tried to show is that the distinction between discrimination and exclusion proves that in the social spaces discrimination is appalling, and that we must fight it; but it is a way in which societies accept the difference, even if it is as something inferior, whereas there are forms of exclusion whereby societies proclaim: "We will not accept these spaces, these expressions," therefore, they exclude them.

The questions are: What do we do from the legal point of view and what do we do from the point of view of the analysis of violence? How do we approach these issues of violence in order to dismantle injustices and, at the same time, deal with the fact that there are groups that are still the victims or targets of violence, even if they do not want to define themselves as sexual groups?

In this respect, the idea that it is the attacker's gaze that produces identity generates an alternative. It is different to say that a person was attacked because he/she was colored or gay than to say the attack responded to the fact that the assailant, through his/her prejudice, saw or perceived the person in this way. Why refer, therefore, to something lesbians represent, to desire among women? It is not a question of vindicating lesbians as an identity that must be recognized *per se* and as more marginal or more excluded than others; it is basically a question of recognizing that there is a form of desire or many forms of desire that do not have a name, that there are many forms of desire that still require to be explored and that have only been seen or become visible through violence; forms of desire that are not recognized even in

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violence, because they are translated into something else; but this does not imply that this violence cannot tell us something about what the threat is, about what the fear and the anxiety are related to, not with the aim of vindicating lesbians as such, as a fixed identity, but of showing that there are certain types of practices that only become evident, or have historically become evident through violence, and that tell us about certain prejudices; those prejudices have to do with the fear of thinking that there may be forms of desire that do not involve masculinity such as we have known it.

**CM:** Is there anything you have not mentioned that is essential to your thinking that you would like to mention now?

**MMG:** One of the most interesting things for my own academic and personal process is the kind of mobility that this subject generates. This is a subject that takes me from theory to practice on a daily basis; it teaches to walk on quicksand, to revalue my opinion permanently; it compels me to address theoretical problems that I am often unable to solve, and forces me to explore spaces of empirical research which do not always confirm what I think.

I think this has been, in my personal and my academic life, a central space to find all my interests. I always considered myself only an academician and a theorist, and with these issues, and above all with the issue of violence, I have been capable of making a contribution to the world through my work and in a dialogue with something that goes beyond the academy, which has been profoundly rewarding and enriching. It keeps me constantly focused on the question; it is a problem that, because of its novelty – not a theoretical one because many theoretical aspects have already been posited – but because of the need to contrast it with what happens specifically in the legal sphere, in political decisions, in public policies, leads me to reassess, not only my thoughts but my way of life and my decisions; it is something that renders the subject inexhaustible.