

# **WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY**

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*This is about having a certain sensibility with respect to the human being in front of you, what possibilities he or she has, what degree of freedom he or she is allowed. This kind of human issue is the core of the debate. Those questions; people imagining their own bodies immersed in an experience such as that of intersexuality generates beautiful things that inspire an aperture, a rupture; that permit envisaging oneself in other places, and ultimately allow us to breathe.*

### **An Interview with Joshua Pimiento Montoya**

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Bogotá, Colombia

**Joshua Pimiento Montoya:** My name is Joshua Pimiento Montoya, I am an anthropologist from the National University of Colombia and I am currently taking a Master's course in Public Health. When I left school in 1997, I started doing some research on transsexuality and intersexuality, especially from the medical point of view. I came across old documents, dating from the mid-twentieth century, and I began to read writings by the original authors on issues of gender, sex and identity. Following this process I ended up participating as an independent activist in Bogotá's LGBT's Working Table: I enrolled in the Public Health Master's Course because in spite of the fact that the Human and Social Sciences had interesting things, they involved very little dialogue with Medicine. There was a sort of antagonism, and in practice, what actually had more weight, for example in the case of intersexuality, was not what the School of Gender Studies said, but what a medical doctor said. I considered it important to establish a dialogue aimed at obtaining recognition of the fact that in the medical field there is a knowledge on the subject, in spite of the strong exercise of authority through which doctors define the truth about the body and about sexuality.

I do not identify myself specifically with any of the letters, L,G,B, or T, although my experiences are directly related to a different construction of the body and a sexuality that escapes the heterosexual norm. I feel that I am constantly discovering new things about myself; therefore, it is complicated to pigeonhole myself into any of these categories.

**Carlos Motta:** What is your current work?

**JPM:** I work at the Instituto Distrital de Participación y Acción Comunal (District Institute of Community Participation and Action), ISPAC, which is an institute in charge of LGBT participation and public policies in the area of territorialization, and of transforming them into something concrete and close to the people. I form part of the traveling community center, a new idea currently under construction, a very nice bet because it seeks to evade the logic of a place (Chapinero) that has been conceived, even in literary texts, as the privileged reference in Bogotá. We move along many localities situated in the geographic periphery or in dynamic scenarios of the LGBT movement; that is the position I am in, in the management section.

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**CM:** What has been the historical role of institutions, medicine, health authorities, the State regarding intersexuality issues?

**JPM:** Historically speaking, I don't know how much they may have contributed. However, when one carries out a bibliographic search, for example in a library's database, what one usually finds are biomedicine texts that study a set of "abnormalities". They classify them at different stages: during intra-uterine development and throughout the life cycle, during childhood, youth, puberty and adulthood. Some research work has been based on genetics; other investigations have been based on endocrinology, embryology, and more recently different areas of knowledge have evidenced an interest in these topics, although activism is scarce. However, Colombia has occasionally produced legislation related to some issues that is ahead of its time. There was a ruling from the Constitutional Court in relation to the case of a person in Antioquía who suffered an accident during childhood and lost a large part of his penis. The doctors recommended that he be assigned as female, which was done, and instructed the parents to treat him as such. This person filed a lawsuit because he considered that this assignment did not match his identity, and the Court ruled in his favor, ordering San Vicente de Paúl Hospital, a university hospital with a long trajectory in Medellín, to perform the surgery required to meet his wishes. At the same time, it set judicial precedent for cases of intersexual persons in general, and pointed out that it is they who must, in an autonomous way, define what their identity is. The problem is that the Court concludes that this autonomy is acknowledged as of age five, and before that time the decision may be reached by the parents.

I am also familiar with some recent research based on a legal perspective and on anthropology as opposed to the biomedical vision of intersexuality. But activism has been very moderate.

There are people who include the letter I within the LGBT movement, LGBTI, I think that with good intentions, but we do not know yet whether there is an interest in this on the part of groups of people who live these kinds of experiences of intersexuality.

**CM:** Is there an organization associated to intersexuality?

**JPM:** There was an organization called *Asociación Colombiana de Estados Intersexuales* (Colombian Association of Intersexual States), but the line of thought of that group did not go hand in hand with the LGBT movement, not because of the existence of an antagonism, but because they envisaged trans-sexuality as a kind of intersexuality and they considered sex had several components, that is to say, the biomedical vision that establishes that sex comprises the chromosomal, the gonadal, and the cerebral component, which can only be informed by the person involved. Within that dimension, they defined intersex as any person in whom some of these components are on the female side, others on the male side, or even in none of these two places. Other people have also explained transsexuality as a form of intersexuality, not necessarily in its origin but indeed as a consequence of it, insofar as surgery and hormonal procedures occasionally give shape to a body that escapes the person's expectations of being totally feminine or totally masculine. At present this organization is not active; notwithstanding this, I am in contact with the people who were the leaders of this group and I know that they are in a recess, period, waiting for some of its members to receive their training, especially in the field of medicine.

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**CM:** Is there any initiative of joining or consolidating with other existing organizations, such as *Colombia Diversa* or Diana Navarro's Corporation?

**JPM:** I believe that *Mujeres al Borde*, for instance, has done some work, but it has been difficult to find people who, based on their experiences, vindicate themselves and call themselves intersexual, and who exercise activism from that place.

One of the persons who contributed to the classification, Marina Talero, included intersexuality within the "trans" classification, which was then termed transgender, but again not because that responded to local dynamics or to people vindicating it. We still don't know whether people wish to be included within the LGBT category or not, now there are less identity postures with regard to LGBT and more emphasis on alliances, on grouping together the people who somehow suffer discrimination or who are not easily understood by society because we are outside the gender-sex system.

**CM:** Going back to the Court's decision, is medical treatment part of that decision, or part of something that may have been derived from it later? Does a doctor have the autonomy to mutilate the genitals and reconstruct the genitals?

**JPM:** As far as I know, there was a more recent ruling involving parents who sued the Social Security Institute because they had not performed surgery on a person affected by congenital suprarenal hyperplasia. Although in terms of chromosomes the fetus was of female gender, it acquired masculine characteristics in the womb. Doctors recommended surgery before age two, in order to feminize or virilize, and I believe the Social Security had not complied with this recommendation. One of the arguments they invoked was that it was not a priority, since the person's life was not at risk. People with a suprarenal hyperplasia condition sometimes have trouble with the management of electrolytes and besides, they must receive medication. I understand the Court ruled in favor of the family, ordering the surgery to be performed, without taking into account the opinion of the person who would undergo the surgery. So it reaffirmed that while the person was under five years old, the parent's decision sufficed. The situation of the health service in Colombia is precarious, despite the fact that there is a law and a subsidized contributive regime, efficacy regarding access to health services is very low. Although many of us contribute to the system, we prefer not to see a doctor because it takes a whole day and the result is not so good. Although this vision of the Court that asserts the right to health is important, there are numerous barriers.

**CM:** I find the issue of decision-making supremely interesting, the duty to decide. Can you explain to me the reason for this need, why simply not decide?

**JPM:** I think there are some medical aspects, but they are minimal. One of those cases is the syndrome termed suprarenal hyperplasia, because if it affects the body's electrolytes, the person may suffer dehydration. But I think this occurs in a minor proportion. What we are talking about here is how medicine has somehow vested itself with an authority to define who is who in many senses, but based on the body, on the materiality of this body. Since it is the authority regarding the knowledge of that body, it is supposed to be the one in charge of defining, but in the framework of a system that only recognizes two possibilities, not just in terms of sex but also of identity. If you are a man you must have a penis, and of a certain size and oriented towards penetration, and if you are a woman, you must have a vagina that may be penetrated.

**CM:** A heterosexual norm.

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**JPM:** It ends up being that, a heterosexual norm, an obligatory heterosexuality but transformed into science, transformed into authority, and that has a strong impact on everyday life, beyond theoretical debates. The Colombian State recognizes only two forms of being at that level: you are registered either as belonging to the female gender, or they register you as belonging to the male gender.

**CM:** I think that at present the only State that recognizes gender neutrality is Australia.

**JPM:** In the case of the birth of a person whose genitals are ambiguous, and read through these binary lenses, what must be done? If a person is not assigned as male or female, he or she cannot have access to certain rights. What do they say at school? There is a whole institutional, cultural, social influence that makes it very difficult to find third, fourth, fifth places, but somehow this is a wager, because this exists. In practice they exist, they are there; suffice it to see what people are like, the enormous diversity of ways of thinking, ways of being, but also of body forms and ways of relating to those bodies. That binary system is very precarious and very oppressive. I think the pressure to define, to decide, has its source there and not necessarily in people's experiences, although occasionally, and this must not be denied, an intersex person does not assume a role, a totally masculine or a totally feminine identity. This happens to many trans-sexual persons, many of them heterosexual, who feel that they are men or that they are women, and who feel they have nothing to do with the I of LGBT; who are oriented, and that generates tensions. I would say this is the source of the pressure; many of us try to find meaning to our life and an important part of this is taking the place that has been somehow predefined for you.

**CM:** Is the subject of choice a burning topic within activism?

**JPM:** I would say it is, but not always in an explicit way. In Colombia, more specifically in Bogotá, activists from the sector and from the Secretariat for Health joined the campaign *Stop Transpatologization*, which proposed, among other things, that the so-called gender identity assignment be excluded from the coming edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). This was one of the objectives, and *Colombia Diversa* joined the initiative. However, in my opinion, there was insufficient reflection on the implications of adhering to that activity. There is a consensus, both among those who live the experience of transsexuality and those who experience other ways of being trans, that this is not a mental illness; people do not feel mentally ill, or disturbed; they consider that what must be changed is society, and they find a stigmatizing element in this classification. But there was not much reflection on the fact that here, in Colombia, albeit in a precarious way, this classification has been one of the fundamental tools for people to have access to health treatments and surgical procedures. I know of many tutelage cases in which the diagnosis has been requested (for the health system it is very difficult to provide treatment for something that it does not consider an illness or a non-zoological entity), and it is unlikely that it will provide treatment for something that has not been classified. This has been the precarious, difficult, incomplete tool many people have used. Those who adhered to the transpatologization campaign did not take this fact into account. How do we obtain health services for these people, considering that in Colombia the obligatory plan does not formally include these types of treatments? I would appeal for local reflection on this issue to explore what effects it may have and determine if it is so positive at the local level. I think these kinds of actions are marked by people who are not associated with classic transsexuality, so to speak, but with other ways of being trans that do not

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imply contacting the health service and demanding it provides the necessary procedures, but rather obtaining social recognition of their possibility of being.

Another of the items addressed by *Transpatologization* was the liberation of physical procedures from psychiatric tutelage. Under the provisions in the DSM 4, a mental health professional, generally a psychiatrist, is the one who defines whether that person is ready or not. It is an interesting subject to address, because the *Transpatologization* manifesto does not mention the gratuity of the services or the guarantee from society or from whomever may be concerned that those services will be provided when necessary. There is a social class component associated to the people who are demanding these kinds of initiatives, which originate in Europe, in Barcelona. Wouldn't it be more important to demand the performance of these treatments on condition that they are defined by the persons involved? That would centralize the issues of transsexuality, intersexuality and other 'trans' forms around the concept of autonomy. Doesn't the demand to separate all this paraphernalia of experiences from the notion of mental disorder not reinforce, to some extent, the stigma of mental illness? Doesn't the act of declaring that we are not included among the mentally deranged imply recognizing and maintaining the stigma of mental illness? There is work to be done at many levels and we must be aware of the implications our demands entail. This is similar to what occurs with the slogan "we have rights because we pay our taxes". What happens if a person is not included in the economic system and does not pay taxes? We are conditioning the holding of rights to an economic requisite. We must not think solely of fighting "our fight", because "our fight" actually involves exclusion based on one's body and one's sexuality, of one's money and the color of one's skin.

**CM:** What is the figure of the intersex person in the Colombian imaginary?

**JPM:** The history of colonization experienced by the whole region, that strict, exclusive way of understanding sex, leads to the questioning of the existence of intersexuality in the first place. Many people find it exotic, abnormal, strange; it produces anguish because it is unfamiliar. What I have seen in Bogotá is that it is something that arouses fear, that generates a certain attraction because it posits the existence of a special place, a place that alters many of our ideas not only in relation to sex but to what is possible or natural.

Through technology, all these dichotomies that appeared to be so clear and so stable, between nature and culture, between that which is inherited at birth and that which is acquired, between alternative lifestyles, all those things make us think. When we perform exercises in which people imagine they have a baby to whom they cannot assign a sex, they are disturbed because they perceive the power of that gender-based system in our society. I would say that that is the place where those people who appear in mythology are also placed.

**CM:** I was going to ask you that. That mythological reference is overdetermined in culture, isn't it?

**JPM:** Yes, it is, but the fact that they exist shows that perhaps they are beings destined to move things, that is to say, special beings with a particular sensibility, very attractive, even in some people's fantasies. In sexual contexts, mentioning the possibility of those not-so-stable bodies generates in some people curiosity and the wish to explore those

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types of bodies. As with many other things, there is a paradox: they are treated as super-human, but also as sub-human.

Anyway, it is a question of having a certain sensibility regarding that person you have in front of you, regarding the possibilities he or she has, what is the degree of freedom he or she is allowed. This kind of human issue is the focal point of the debate. Those questions; people imagining their own bodies undergoing an experience such as intersexuality generates beautiful things that inspire an overture, a rupture, that permit envisaging oneself in other places, and ultimately allow us to breathe.

**CM:** I think that sensibility you make reference to in relation to parents or to society has been mutilated, not only in the case of intersex persons but also in the case of any difference, either physical or emotional. What is the cause that leads to the rupture of this natural relationship with a son or a daughter?

**JPM:** I believe this has a lot to do with what being a person means, that is, integration in a society, any society, implies many impositions. A researcher proposed the notion of culture as a conversation you join in when it has already started, and once you leave, the conversation continues. All societies demand a certain type of behavior from their members, they share certain types of beliefs that allow us to create the illusion that we know how our universe is constituted and how we move in it, how we interrelate, what place we occupy, and there are a whole series of mechanisms that lead us to think that this is real and that ultimately, the stronger our adherence to those sets of norms, the greater our possibilities of being happy will be. I think all that is an illusion; we start with our children, prevailing upon them and raising them to be good people, making them adapt themselves to society so that they can have a place within that society. It is very difficult to request families not to demand, not to set those behavioral parameters in relation to gender and sex. I think this has more to do with what we know about ourselves as human beings, if our task is to be people, to be roles, to be "legible" people, acceptable people, legitimate people, people with rights, because that will mark the extent of our negotiation with society regarding to what extent we will be allowed to be. If we adhere to more radical things, in the sense of going to the roots; in the sense that each one of us is a self-determined person, discovers who one is, we will surely have some different forms of education and of "socialization". On the one hand, there is the demand for respect... but what does respecting oneself, respecting one's choices mean? What if your choices affect me? That is one of the answers we receive frequently. However corny this may be, I believe one of the strongest energies in the world is love. Love is something one must solve, because it is not easy to define, but when one loves someone, or when one loves oneself, one can hardly find alternatives without being who one is, although this may take a lifetime or even longer. In this respect, the task of being a father, a mother, of being there, guided by love rather than by social prescriptions, although these inevitably form part of education, will surely make us more autonomous and more giving beings, more prepared for that love, without so many barriers. When one talks with young people, with boys or girls, one is pleasantly surprised at how easily they understand that there are many kinds of bodies; it is we adults who have a conflict.

**CM:** I think that perhaps religion has displaced affection and love, because it has moved these feelings from the body and transferred them to a superior force. What, in your opinion, is the role of religion in this equation?

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**JPM:** The relationship with religion is difficult, but what do we understand by religion? In principle, I would not include only the system of beliefs and social institutions. We

live in a human world in which power is extremely important, it is in constant circulation, there are struggles for power all the time, and religion, of course, is no exception. Two delicate things converge here: beliefs, like spiritual concerns, are important in the case of intersexuality and transsexuality experiences, because when faced with a body that deviates from the norm, or with an identity that deviates from what is expected, people often seek spiritual explanations that may provide a meaning to that experience. The fact of having a body in which two basic elements of nature coalesce may be a sign of divinity for some people, and this has been the case in many societies. Many Pre-Columbian societies placed a third gender in the shamanic world, since they found it very easy to communicate with the world of spirits. Here we find some related religious ideas and an apparently positive place for these people. In Colombia, the Catholic religion, the Judeo-Christian tradition, but more specifically the Catholic faith continues to have a strong impact on society; and the Catholic religion has marked hierarchies; it is an extremely patriarchal system, with power clearly exercised by men and in which women have a subordinate place. In this regard, it continues to have a strong influence on people's opinions.

I believe that with these struggles for power, religion often attempts to dominate people's lives and not necessarily to contribute to their having more freedom, or to their being happier or more autonomous. In this case it becomes a tool of oppression, of control, of domination, of negation of possibilities. This goes against a large part of the purposes that most religions proclaim. It is not so much a question of talking about divinity but of envisioning it as something external, and when something is external and I am closer to the divine because I wear a cassock, I am not really contributing to what the vocation to the priesthood is supposed to be, which implies helping people, but it rather contributes to the reproduction of stereotypes, of the forms of domination. And the Catholic Church has made an alliance with those forms of domination, beginning with colonization itself. I know many people undergoing trans experiences who find in the spiritual world a component that is very important in their lives, and in the same way, when religions tend to punish and negate, they cause them much suffering. Not only as something external that results in repression, but also as something the person internalizes, and he or she begins to perceive him/herself as a non-viable, not valid being, to hurt him/herself, or to accept a subordinate place in society. He/she will think it is all right to be punished, it is all right to have only two economic possibilities in life because one is a bad person who embarrasses one's family.

Besides, there is a very powerful Christian force that is gradually conquering some places; seats in the Senate or the Chamber of Deputies and ultra-conservative stands apparently rooted in the Catholic religion, such as that of the current Attorney General. In this context the relationship between non-heteronormative sexualities, gender constructions that deviate from those norms and from religion, especially from the Catholic and Christian ones, is very problematic.

**CM:** In Colombia, religion has historically provided a kind of diagnosis in relation to intersexuality. Are priests consulted about everything here?

**JPM:** I really couldn't say. It is possible that, occasionally, in small towns where the priest is a very important authority to be taken into consideration, his opinion may have an influence, but one must also bear in mind that in small towns and parishes priests

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do not always adhere to the dogmas of religion. I have known of people who have found in their parish priest an ally that has allowed them to say things such as: this, too, is the work of God, this way of being is also the work of God, and as such its form

of expression must be respected. A very distinguished member of Islam points out that in Iran, a country with extremely harsh laws with respect to homosexuality, especially male homosexuality, transsexuality is conceived simply as a person who has a masculine spirit and a female body or a feminine spirit and a male body and that, therefore, the State must contribute to perform the necessary surgeries.

**CM:** Yes, it is said that some homosexual persons, or persons who identify themselves more as homosexual, resort to those surgeries to find a socially acceptable place. I wanted to ask you what the cultural representation from the media has been. Is it something that is publicly discussed in Colombia? And if it is, in what terms?

**JPM:** I had the chance to participate in a research work on the press spanning the period between 1991 and 2006. The subject was rarely mentioned. A newspaper, *El Espacio*, which is usually classified as a tabloid, did show cases, but as peculiarities, as something exotic.

Other news were related to the Olympic Games, in which one finds people to whom it is difficult to assign a gender and the alleged advantages that being male in sports competitions against women who are female at birth are called into question. In other mass media, the subject has been addressed by some sensationalist TV programs such as *Séptimo Día*, which has presented several cases, but what is paradoxical and interesting is that thanks to those cases, many people have learned about this and may say: I am not the only one.

**CM:** In relation to the diverse ethnic groups and the different social classes, what is the conversation between intersexuality and transgender identity in that logic?

**JPM:** This is a pending issue. *Planeta Paz*, where many social sectors, including indigenous groups converged, was a very valuable experience. But from my point of view, the LGBT movement has been too focused on its extremely urban, middle-class and upper middle-class requests, which have marked the same slogans that can be seen in the demonstrations, the same organizations that are visible, that move more resources, not only in economic terms but in terms of capacity to influence with regard to general politics. I would say this is an issue yet to be addressed, a very interesting one. Personally speaking, I consider it very important, because one of the reasons why I decided to study anthropology was that I had the idea that in other human groups, far away, in the jungle, there were some different ways of understanding body, gender, and sexual diversity.

The narratives of the chroniclers of the Spanish conquest mention the existence of people who definitely differed from the European norms and they were surprised because these people held prestigious positions within society. Most commonly they were shamans; like so many who communicate with the world of spirits because they are more than human, they are above the elementary difference, the organization of bodies into two groups, common to many cultures.

But some activist indigenous groups in Colombia negate this reality saying: “well, fortunately, there is none of that amongst us”. I learned about the case of a person who



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liked other men and he fled in order to live in Bogotá, and when he returned to his hometown he experienced a very difficult situation, being doubly rejected on account of his sexuality and of his being an HIV carrier. For his community, he was the incarnation of the vices, of the horrible things that came from the West, from the world of white

people. Therefore, it is not a question of idealizing indigenous people. Generally speaking, whenever society privileges its way of understanding the world, its norms, its classifications of human beings, we all lose. That family lost a valuable member; society, his society, lost a being who had a place, who should have had a place. Defending tooth and nail any classification system imposed upon human beings is already a problem. Why not let us be, why not let us be happy? If a person living a particular experience finds more meaning to his/her life and may simply be, the rest will also be happier and will be in greater harmony; it is a global benefit. But to stop classifying is very complicated, culture has that vocation; it classifies us, it organizes us. Cultural change is important, but sometimes, as is the case of the struggle within the LGBT movement itself, the fact of not being heteronormative does not imply not being normative and not demanding that the other be a good gay person: “zero feathers, with the feet on the ground, and serious,” or “I want to have a relationship with a man, not with little women,” those things end up hurting us. Whoever feels that this is his essence, casting feathers away or whatever, let him do so. What is the urgency to put pressure on him, to shape him in a certain way and not let him be?

While we can handle certain classifications that sometimes orient us, we must understand that reality always goes beyond them, fortunately. All the time there are situations that confirm that there isn't an ideal way to classify that covers everything and that is really fair; let us take classifications as transient things, let us not cling to them; if necessary, let us use them to vindicate rights, but we must not allow them to become a kind of truth and of legitimization to impose it upon others, or even upon oneself, because we will end up being the victims of that process.