

**WE
WHO
FEEL
DIFFERENTLY**
INTERVIEWS

No citizen is required to be a good person in order to demand rights, but minorities are. People who are not marked by their sexual orientation, or by their gender identity; people who are “normal” are not asked for a certificate of morality in order to demand their rights; minorities are.

An Interview with Franklin Gil Hernández

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Franklin Gil Hernández's house, Bogotá, Colombia

Franklin Gil Hernández: My name is Franklin Gil Hernández, I have lived in Bogotá for around 13 years, but I am from Antioquia. I work at the School of Gender Studies at the National University. My interest in the subject has to do with my work. This interest was originally of an academic type, but eventually it became a personal and political issue. I occupy a hybrid place because I have participated in the LGBT social movement, I was the spokesman for the lesbians, gays, bisexuals and trans Table in Bogotá, but I have taken holidays from activism, I am engaged in academic issues once again, although I don't dissociate myself entirely, I am alert, I attend some demonstrations, I collaborate mainly with aspects related to constitutional lawsuits, which almost always require an academic concept.

Carlos Motta: What work are you currently carrying out within the academic field?

FGH: My field of work is gender relationships, gender and sexuality, and racial relationships. I have carried out work on racial discrimination, sexual discrimination, tensions within the agenda of the feminist movement, the black movement. I have also produced works on sexuality, racial relationships, and I am currently engaged in work on racial discrimination in middle-class sectors in Bogotá. My latest production on sexuality is a reflection on gay marriage. It is a personal issue; I explain why I am tired of certain forms of activism and how I am interested in other things which I think are very important. I find that rights, the law, mean very little; I would like a movement that spoke of other things.

CM: What is it that worries you about the current fixation with gay marriage?

FGH: I think that rights are very important, and every time that any efforts are carried out in this respect, I participate. However, I think that this agenda is not very ambitious, and a movement based on sexual issues should be talking about other things. I feel that the movement speaks very little about sexuality, very little about proposing changes to this society, about how to experience sex, how to experience solidarity beyond marriage, beyond a couple; it speaks very little about other things, other proposals. I understand that having rights is very important, but the agenda should be more ambitious in the sense of proposing a more structured change in the sexual order, which is an order that continues to discriminate; even with gay marriage, there are many items that are left outside the agenda.

CM: What is the history of activism in relation to LGBT issues in this city, what is the agenda, and what are the interests that have emerged in the past few years?

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

FGH: Well, I am not a historian, so I might not be very precise with the dates. When I say activism of the 80s, it's when León Zuleta, Manuel Velandia first made their appearance and when the first demonstrations took place in Bogotá. This is a remote antecedent; the Bogotá movement became visible and made itself strong in 2003, 2004, associated to an NGO called *Planeta Paz*, which began to organize an agenda related to peace in Colombia, convening *campesinos*, women, inhabitants of African descent, and the LGBT sector. Following this process, some people who carried out a personal, isolated work began to gather together to devise a joint agenda. I think that was a landmark. The process of *Planeta Paz* was a national process.

CM: What was, initially, the movement's agenda?

FGH: I think at that moment marriage was not the main concern, the main concern was how the sector comprising lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual persons could put together an agenda in relation to peace in the country. What they tried to say was that if other problems, such as sexual discrimination, were not solved, it made no sense to talk about peace in Colombia. The concern with the issue of couples came later, and it had to do with the work of *Colombia Diversa* and Los Andes University's group of Public Interest Law, which have carried out very valuable, very sensible work with very important results, for at present in Colombia, same sex couples have almost all the rights that heterosexual couples have, except as related to adoption.

CM: How did you become involved in that first phase of activism?

FGH: At that time I did not know many people from the LGBT movement, I got to know them during the final process of *Planeta Paz*. The social movement associated to this issue that I became familiar with in the first place was the one that grouped people with AIDS; my first works were on sexual and reproductive health. With Mara Viveros we worked together on youth and juvenile sexuality, and the first approach to the movement was a work on AIDS based on men who have sex with men, to use the health category that is employed in that context.

CM: Mara Viveros also commented on that project, but she did not have the chance to refer to it in detail.

FGH: It was a concern of the Government, of the Ministry of Health. In Colombia there is a concentrated epidemics; the prevalence of AIDS in homosexual men is high as compared to the population at large. It is not like in other countries, where it is more generalized. We created an intervention project; the Ministry wanted a proposal to work with men on the prevention of AIDS. The project was coordinated by Mara, and it included María Elvia Domínguez, John Harold Estrada, and myself. At that time I was finishing my studies in anthropology. That was my first contact with Mara Viveros. We had to organize some workshops with gays and transvestites, I can't remember if they extended to bisexual men. We perceived masculinity as an important topic to address in order to contribute to the prevention of AIDS, since many risk behaviors were associated to certain forms of masculinity, the way in which men establish a relationship with their bodies, with risk. Mara works with masculinity and the challenge was how to introduce gender in an intervention; we tried to examine the models of masculinity the men had and the absence of self-care practices; not using condoms, not taking care of the persons with whom one has sex, the model that implies that the more one "screws", the more manly one is, and things like that. We had to hide a public

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

concern, that the epidemics is concentrated, but the State has many moral concerns on the matter which we did not share.

CM: How did you reconcile the theoretical interest or the cultural critique concerning certain forms of masculinity or of gender relationship with the Government's policy?

FGH: The central notion was that certain forms of masculinity, of *machismo*, led to men adopting risk practices. For example, that association of masculinity with risk, with violence, with public display, which in the sexual standards grants men some permissions in relation to sex that are not granted to women. Gay men are men, and they have that same permission to have sex, and another way to prove one is a man is to have sex, to know that one has power over certain bodies and that one can have sexual access to them. There is a very interesting discussion on the ethics of care among men; men do not have the role of caregivers that women have, then how can one generate, for instance, a non-moral bet aimed at people taking care of other people? The issue of promiscuity always came up, and we tried to establish that that was not the issue, that it was about care, about taking care of oneself.

CM: Is promiscuity associated to masculinity?

FGH: Yes, it is. That homosexuals are promiscuous and that AIDS exist because they are irresponsible is a very important stereotype. What I am trying to change is that discourse. We thought it was a moralist argument, for us it did not make sense, what we wanted was something different: that people question themselves about the models of masculinity they have, models which generate unequal relationships, also among men; that makes one think about the other when one has sex, and not about one's own well being. I don't know how this went on, because I got tired and I didn't go on working. I am not interested in the State controlling people's bodies, asking people how they "fuck", if they use condoms, how many, in what time, if they are married, and although there is always a progressive position in intervention proposals there are small moralist things that are said. For example, at the international level, promiscuity continues to be a standard in relation to AIDS. The definition of promiscuity is absurd, say, if one has "fucked" with three persons in a year or two, I don't know. In many countries, homosexuals cannot donate blood, and if you ask the officials who administer the norms in this area, they do not have the issue of prevalence in mind, they say homosexuals are irresponsible, promiscuous, they sleep with everybody, then it is a norm that is apparently backed up by a scientific evidence, but it is actually a moral prejudice.

CM: Would you say that this is currently the case with the health authorities in relation with the LGBT communities?

FGH: No, I think this has changed a lot, and people – also people in the Government – understand the subject in a different way. But I think it is not the most generalized way to understand it. I think the framework for intervention in the issue of AIDS has changed, but there are still many remnants of a moral model; when we speak of sex, there will always be an element of morality; sex is bad; it is difficult to render sex positive.

CM: What is the relationship between sexual health and the system of social classes and ethnic minorities in Colombia?

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

FGH: That is part of the issue we address with Mara. In Colombia, it is very difficult to categorize people by race and those of us who work with these categories face many problems. For example, in sexual health we have no differentiated data; one can only make inferences by regions with more numerous black populations. In Brazil, surveys regarding quality of life and all other surveys include the color of the skin. Here we are all “mestizos”, we are all of mixed race, and allegedly, there is no racial discrimination; talking about that would have no social pertinence. As for class differences, it is clear that in Latin America, the utilization of contraceptive methods is a racist practice; the use of definitive methods of contraception in popular sectors and in black populations was denounced in Brazil. There have also been some denouncements regarding indigenous populations in Peru. The utilization of definitive contraception is very frequent in the Third World. If one analyzes what is behind this, it has to do with people not having control; a pill is for a very rational, very organized person and the people in this world, and above all the poor people, black people, do not have the capacity to use a modern method, so it is done in one go in order to control the population. Also, in Colombia the figures for definitive methods are very high, and these methods are recommended to poor people, to marginal people, so that they stop reproducing.

CM: What is the relation between the LGBT community and race?

FGH: There is very little information on this matter, but there is a growing interest in it. I began to do some work with Samanta, a transvestite activist who is currently in Barcelona for security reasons. We started a discussion on racism and homophobia, and because of her own personal experience, we also talked about gender and the so-called “endo-discrimination”, a term which I dislike, but which means that a dynamics of discrimination based on class, race, or gender exists within the LGBT sector. I don't like this categorization because I think it generates an effect that is the opposite of what it seeks. It is not a question of denying that racism exists, and that gays and lesbians are as racist as the rest of the Colombians. But the mentioned category is treated as an intra-community problem, and it isn't that. I think this is due to more general dynamics. If masculinity is valued among gay men, it is because masculinity is a value in the Colombian society in general, and gays and lesbians are not better or worse than the rest of the people, and they shouldn't be. There is also a moral imposition: you who speak of discrimination also discriminate. No citizen is required to be good in order to demand his/her rights, but minorities are. People who are not marked by their sexual orientation, or by their gender identity; people who are “normal” are not asked for a certificate of morality in order to demand their rights; minorities are. It is not a question of negating, I think work should be done on the subject, we must talk about racism, I am interested in rendering racism visible, there are problems of exclusion; there are places where transvestites, black persons, persons from popular sectors, effeminate persons are not allowed. What I do not agree with is the type of explanations offered for this matter. One must also understand that the LGBT movement has a class bias and it is important to bear this in mind. The LGBT movement is a middle-class movement and this is not by chance. It happens not only in Colombia but in all parts of the world, because there is an organization related to consumption. Gay neighborhoods, I believe everywhere in the world, are located in the most bourgeois districts in the city; here it can be found in Chapinero. The question is, what benefits do people from the popular sectors obtain from what has been achieved, for example, in Bogotá, for Bogotá is a very unequal city with much segregation by class. Here poor people are far and isolated, and one wonders, if public policies are aimed at educated middle-class persons who are familiar with up-to-date information, who are politicized,

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

what happens with those people from the neighborhoods where, in addition to the rest, there are armed groups.

CM: Is there a way of knowing what the level of visibility of LGBT entities is among less favored classes?

FGH: I don't know. But it is identified as something completely unequal, that is, you are talking about a middle-class movement, which does not penetrate in the lower classes except for some groups. Yes, there are some who do, there are some who visit the poorer districts, but generally speaking, the work of the movement is a "high-profile" work, namely, speaking with the Government, about things that are very important, but there is something that is not done: there is very little contact with popular sectors.

CM: I think it's interesting that the focus is the middle-class and not the lower classes, where there are less resources, not only economic resources, but also less possibilities of coming out of the "closet" and of forming an identity based on a sexual orientation.

FGH: Yes, but there are also many assumptions. One can see in small towns that there are "drag queens" that are more or less integrated from a social point of view, I'm not saying that they have a good time, they suffer a lot of harassment, but they have a social position. I think there are rural societies, located in remote areas or popular societies, that solve this. What I am thinking is that the middle-class has defined a way of being, a way of having an LGBT identity that is strongly marked by the market, by access to places, by the way in which one appears before society, the clothes one wears, the identity one reveals. And that also has a strong relationship with marriage; marriage is a bourgeois value. Who is interested, for instance, in there being a community property? The concern for common assets does not interest people who have no assets. This is a style and a concern of a certain social group that imposes an agenda and speaks on behalf – I have also done that – of a lot of people. I think that what one does is to reduce many ways of living to a given way: to be gay you must be married, politicized, you must belong to...But there are people who are not interested in politics, who do not want to marry, and that is why we must see how these differences can be integrated in a more ambitious agenda.

CM: Until now the strategy has been one of visibilization, both political and legislative?

FGH: Of course, but it is a moral strategy because it is a very specular strategy, in the sense that society is saying that gay persons are promiscuous, and gay persons defend themselves saying that they get married, they have families, they have jobs and pay taxes. That is a very frequent discourse: one has rights because one belongs to the middle-class, because one pays taxes, one is a respectable citizen, because one works, is married, is a professional, many class traits. And the people who cannot study and have no assets and no job, don't they have the right to ask for rights? This is a problem, and a very complicated one. Besides, I am worried about the image that is being built, a correct image of being gay and lesbian, and the other issues are far behind.

CM: I would like us to go back to Samanta, Can you tell me about the work you did together and how it relates with this and with the issue of race?

FGH: We conducted interviews using a feminist methodology; we resorted to our experiences, me as a faggot and racially marked as a black man, Samanta as a negress and a transvestite, we presented our personal experience and interviewed other people, especially black, transvestite and gay persons. For the persons who

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

militate in the black movement, homosexual militancy has been very difficult. In the case of Brazil, this has been documented, but here not much is known. The saying that homosexuality is a white vice had to be studied by examining life stories. What had more weight, racial discrimination or discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation? We concluded that it depended on the situation, the person, or the story. For example, the model of couple, getting a partner, who people couple with, those racial differences, how they are negotiated, the lifestyle, all that is also normative, it does not have to do only with class. I think it is also a racialized model, it is a white, heterosexual, class-related model, even though we are referring to homosexuals. The work sought to inquire into those differences. Colombia is a country in which the racial dimension is not visible and it is not a public issue; the people we interviewed did not perceive certain experiences because they have been socialized as Colombian men and women, they feel that there is no racism.

CM: I understand you have also worked on issues related to the bisexual identity and the sort of skepticism that we find regarding this subject.

FGH: In recent years, bisexuality has gained much visibility in Bogotá. In a survey we conducted in the course of the demonstration, we saw many bisexual persons, who assumed themselves as bisexual. A significant detail is that most of them are young people, it is a new category. However, I think that bisexuality has become visible in the least interesting way possible. In my opinion, bisexuality affords the chance to question a binary order, to understand sex, to understand gender, the possibility to invent for ourselves a different way of being together, which has nothing to do with being a man. Bisexual persons don't talk about any of these matters. Bisexual persons are talking about homosexuals not liking them, about lesbians not liking them, about the fact that nobody likes them. They are like an ethnicity: they have a certain way of life and they all think alike. In the meetings in which we have had debates I formulated these doubts: gays and lesbians have already done this; they structured themselves as a group and they all think alike, almost like an ethnicity, with the strategy of minorities, but you have the chance to do something different. Why don't you do it? In my view, bisexuality is apparently more related to *queer*, and I do not perceive this relationship, at least in what is happening in Bogotá. That is why I stopped calling myself a bisexual, I don't find it very interesting, in this context, to call myself a bisexual.

CM: A few minutes ago you were telling me that you didn't want people to be necessarily obliged to become politicized in order to have an identity, but in this case you seem to be suggesting the contrary. Are you asking that they become politicized?

FGH: It is important to become politicized, but there are several ways of doing so. When people become activists, they forget that they have not been activists all their lives and they refer to those who remain in the "closet" as cowards. It is necessary to see the political potential of all the things that one does not perceive as political. I don't believe that one must necessarily form part of a group to become politicized, that is, it doesn't have to be the way I do it. I have been a member of groups, I write things, I go to meetings, but there are people who do other things, there are people whose politics involve defending their project as a couple. Defending something that may be very traditional may be their life policy. There are people who are in the streets, who go to pubs, who "fuck" with a lot of people, and that is their policy, they are experiencing their sexuality in the way they think a person should experience it freely. The imaginary must not be changed into a moral model. I really like the slogan of a group of lesbians which says: "we lesbians are bad and we can be worse"; I think it is a more interesting bet,

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

not in the sense of their not being a concern for social life, no harm is being done, they are only saying: "this you call immoral and bad is a human possibility".

All this disorder – which some criticize – of all these people who participate in a demonstration, who do not participate "seriously", with posters, but rather celebrate a party, is a political demonstration. Kissing in the street, or that transvestites show their tits, those are political manifestations because their vindication is in their bodies. And all that mass, that mass of people who know nothing, exists, and there are people who have nothing to do but just exist. Besides, there are people who exist in very hostile contexts, then, if they do not get together, it doesn't matter. If they simply go out in the street from their homes to their jobs, whatever these may be, when they walk along the street with their bodies characterized in the gender identity they wish to have, without saying anything, that is their political existence.

CM: Those who have a comfortable standard of living tend to become un-politicized, since their lives are not at risk. Some activists denounce that this comfort is a replica of heterosexual values and moral.

FGH: Let us have a debate on marriage, which is an untouchable institution from a social point of view. It is important to request it, but once it has been requested, there must be a debate on the institution. What types of relationships does it propose? Family is a very violent institution. Why defend an institution that is violent? There are other ways of being together that may function well, and perhaps they are more tranquil, more fair.

CM: What you seem to suggest is that the politicized, radical, gay, lesbian or transgender sphere builds a sort of unshakeable morality. That is to say, in order to be a good gay, a good lesbian, one should behave in a certain way. But, on the other hand, there is that other national morality, influenced by Catholicism and capitalism, that opposes the first, and I think you disagree with both. What is the proposal?

FGH: I don't know, it is not clear to me, so much so that I don't know what I do in my everyday life. Surely many inconsistent things. What happens is that I am taking a distance from certain morality in the LGBT movement, and actually, I am not talking about two different moralities, they are one and the same, because they share the same values, for example, family, marriage, monogamy. It is not an alternative morality, it is the same one.

CM: What happens with the promiscuous and anarchic, with the people who are not interested in these categories?

FGH: It is difficult. Some time ago I listened to a debate of a *queer* group called *Divergentes* and one of the questions we had for them was if *queer* was an identity or if it is an anti-identity proposal. However, it is difficult to be in the margins of identities and call oneself *queer*. To call oneself thus it to give the name an identifying use. But I do believe there are possibilities of playing along with this thing, although they are limited because nobody is outside the social world, and all men and women share a morality and values.

CM: We also share the possibility of infringing them. It gives you the possibility of having a more encompassing, public personal life.

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

FGH: And of having a decent social place, and I choose the word decent because it means having the right to live the way one wishes to. The cultural misunderstanding with regard to the Court ruling, which many people think is a law, or that it is marriage, is very interesting. In the case of some lesbian women who were living together in a place where there are no public policies, there was a problem; one of them committed a felony. It was interesting to note that people did not mention the fact that they were lesbians when they talked about the matter; people talked about the women as they would have talked about any couple, and they said: "it is the same, now that is the same", meaning "they are married". People solve things, people gradually solve things. Those laws do bring about cultural changes; those public policies do generate changes. But the major changes are not being produced.