

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

When one has nothing, masculinity becomes one of the few attributes that a boy can boast; he becomes hyper-virile, he constructs masculine identities which are often violent, defensive. That hyper-virility has a lot to do with the subordinate social position; it implies a class and ethnic-racial expression.

An Interview with Mara Viveros

March 17, 2010

Mara Viveros's house in Bogotá, Colombia

Mara Viveros: My name is Mara Viveros, my initial training was as an economist but I later became an anthropologist, I like to mention this because it also explains who I am, that is, a person I have been seeking. I started with anthropology, I developed an undergraduate thesis on female flower vendors, and the day I was defending my work they said to me: this is economic anthropology. I felt happy because they had already marked a path for me, I became an anthropologist, I traveled to France and I studied sociology first and then anthropology. What interested me about anthropology was the anthropology of the body, of health, of sickness, and always, the question of gender.

The question of gender is a personal concern; I participated in a self-awareness group, one of the first feminist groups; at that time we produced a sort of newsletter called *Fémina Sapiens*, which showed the wish to visibilize women's contribution to intellectual work. At the same time I had militating concerns associated to feminism and I also participated in the left-wing movement, but I quit on account of critiques concerning androcentrism. I was a Trotskyist supporter but I gave it up due to lack of participation of women, among other things.

France was a door to the world, not only to the European world but to the global south, that is to say, to Africa, to Asia. It was very important to recognize my multiple identities, not only as a Colombian woman but also as a Latin American woman. At that time in France people spoke little about Colombia, I was Latin American; there the differences between Bolivians, Colombians, Peruvians disappeared. Many times they asked me if I was from Martinique because I spoke French fluently and my appearance was Caribbean, then I gradually connected with the people from the African Diaspora and I felt part of that Diaspora, it meant gaining awareness of being part of that Diaspora. During my stay in France, feminism was in crisis, it was not in its heyday, it was rather a moment of retreat of feminism. It was therefore a period of academic training, like taking a Master's course, but I think it was more than that; becoming an anthropologist, discovering the world and being present in many debates on a great number of issues, having friends, fellow students from all over the world, and understanding that there are questions on common concerns. I worked on the subject of health and sickness, representations of health and sickness and gender differences in these representations: how the body was divided, and what was thought about health and sickness.

I returned to Colombia and I did research work on the social factors determining maternal mortality, and little by little I approached the field of sexual and reproductive

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

health. It is a field that is a sort of intersection between the studies of medical anthropology and the studies of gender and sexuality. I found a convergence between my academic training and my personal concerns. I gradually rediscovered old political questions and, at the same time, a space for professional action that has a lot to do with the political sphere, because it was also a time when movements revolving around sexual citizenship began to develop.

The field of sexual and reproductive health is associated to feminist women and their wish to position the issue in international conferences. The issue of self-determination in matters of women's bodies, for example, is a political issue. I worked on the issue of abortion, on the press discourse on abortion between 1974 and 1994. I considered that representation of the press in the public space important, because different social actors who expressed their opinion on abortion and constructed opinion regarding abortion converged there. The Church expressed its opinion there, but also did doctors, lawyers, jurists and the women's social movement.

I resumed the issue of abortion two years ago, in a comparative investigation of heterosexualities, contraception and abortion in Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Bogotá. On this occasion I was not so interested in the public debate; I was interested, rather, in the experience of abortion and the making of the decision after the decriminalization of abortion in 2006, when people spoke more freely about their experiences of abortion. The investigation shows that the ruling has not had as much influence as we would have wanted, and that the question of abortion continues to be taboo; there is a great silence with respect to it. The investigation also shows that there isn't a single form of heterosexuality; there are many, and that heterosexuality is as constructed as homosexuality. It is a matter of questioning the space of heterosexuality as a norm, as a natural place.

CM: What is, historically, that heterosexual norm in Colombia?

MV: It is obligation, that is, the definition of family as composed of a man and a woman, and to think that men and women are naturally destined to meet one another sexually, to procreate, to form families; that is the norm. What is abnormal is homosexuality, or any other sexuality norm that does not end in procreation. For there are also non-procreative heterosexualities, which are also a form of heterosexuality. Besides, I think sexuality is crossed by other experiences, ethnic-racial ones, for instance. In that respect, I think "white" heterosexuality is different from "black" heterosexuality. Heterosexuality is not the same, that is, gender relationships have been constructed in different ways in the differentiated contexts.

CM: Could you refer to the Colombian context and mention how that norm is rendered visible within the cultural sphere and, in the theoretical field, what work has been done in Colombia in that respect?

MV: In Colombia the question of heterosexuality seems to be a strange one, it is not a subject of study. Or rather, heterosexuality is the normal thing, it is natural, then why study it? But the cultural norm is that we are all heterosexuals and that there are some minorities, some exceptions, of people who are either sick or different, as when one speaks of a handicapped person. There are sexually handicapped people who are not heterosexual; this has been the cultural norm in Colombia. In Colombia there have been many studies of family, but the heterosexual norm has never been questioned. There is a strong tradition in anthropology; for example Virginia Gutiérrez de Pineda,

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

who wrote a very interesting work on culture and family in Colombia in the 1960s. She showed that family was different in the diverse regional cultures. But in spite of referring to diversity in terms of regional cultures, she never spoke about it in terms of sexual practices and it never occurred to her to question the norm of heterosexuality.

CM: Her emphasis was on ethnic diversities?

MV: She didn't even speak about ethnicity, she spoke of regional cultures, it was like taking into account what has been said many times about this country, that it is a country of regions. The Caribbean region is different from the Pacific region; she spoke of the fluvial-mining culture; she included the Caribbean and the Pacific within the same group; she spoke of the Andean zone, of the mountain region, also of the Hispanic-Santanderean complex. Although there was an ethnic element, she didn't name it as such, she spoke in terms of regional cultures. Translated into contemporary terms, she speaks more of ethnic diversity than of sexual diversity and what she shows are the different ways of assuming heterosexuality or how the heterosexual norm works in different cultural contexts. She shows that men in the coastal areas tend to have more women; polygamy appears to be something more frequent in fluvial-mining cultures. Also, that there is an apparently double morale in the Antioquia culture or the mountain culture: the condition for the beloved wife to exist is the possibility of going to a brothel, of being able to live certain experiences with the prostitute and certain others with the wife. I think it's interesting to rescue her work as a contribution that implies a questioning of certain common ideas in relation to, for example, that there is only one family. She says that there are different kinds of families and that they must be situated in a historical context and a context of regional culture. Still, she never dares to question heterosexuality. In fact, that began to be questioned very recently; it has to do with the circulation of ideas and the process lived in other countries in relation to the property rights of same sex couples. It was then that the notion of family and that of property rights began to be questioned, that is, who can be the beneficiary of those rights. It was along that path that heterosexuality began to be questioned.

CM: Based on the existence of an established discourse in relation to homosexuality or diverse sexuality?

MV: Exactly. But the discourses on homosexuality had not addressed the issue of family; either; that is recent and it is more associated to the debate on property rights, a debate that was also held in France, with regard to the civil pact of solidarity.

CM: What has happened between the 1960s and the present?

MV: Several things have happened: feminism, the feminist movement, which arrived in Colombia in the 1970s. The Colombian newspapers report what occurs in the world; the liberation of American feminist women, who take off their brassieres, make bonfires with intimate clothing, place phalluses in test tubes, all this in a very scandalous way. At the same time, many women who have studied abroad return to Colombia bringing with them the notion of the importance of self-awareness groups, of the strength women can gain by joining forces, of critique of androcentrism, of the so-called women's liberation. Another issue that emerged was the questioning of heterosexuality, the vindication of the existence of other sexual practices, of a different form of sexuality. León Zuleta had contact with the feminists, but he spoke of homosexuality; Manuel Velandia would do the same at a later stage. As of the 1970s, the feminist movement begins to manifest itself in a different way, but mention must be made of the

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

fact that the women's social movement had already existed before that: women fought for the right to vote in the year 1954, groups like the Union of Colombian Female Citizens, who fought in favor of women exercising the rights of citizenship.

CM: Did a relationship between feminists and lesbians exist at that time?

MV: No. I attended the first Feminist Congress of Latin America and the Caribbean and there was a small tension there between feminists and lesbians. In Colombia there is a difficult situation regarding lesbianism, namely, the women feminists of that time wished to differentiate themselves from the lesbians, they wanted to say "the fact that we are feminists does not mean we are lesbians." From an operative point of view, from a strategic point of view they wanted to keep a distance, because if it was difficult to accept the ideas of women's liberation, it was much more difficult to accept the ideas of lesbianism, which questioned not only the norms of gender but also the norm of obligatory heterosexuality. Therefore the relationship has not been so close; there have been tensions that persist to date. The issue of sexuality was addressed in that first congress, in one of the commissions, and other subjects such as abortion, sexual pleasure, lesbianism were also discussed. Besides, the Congress was very festive, many women discovered erotic desire in that meeting; there was a sort of collective "coming out". Above all, it was like discovering a kind of festive resonance that made us women feel like sisters and feel attracted to one another. For once it was important to be beautiful in the eyes of other women and not in the eyes of men.

CM: Was there an organized group of lesbians opposing the feminist movement?

MV: In the group in which I worked there were lesbian women, but it was a mixed group, it wasn't an issue that divided us; the group of lesbian women even had certain leadership, but they did not make lesbianism a dividing political cause. At a later stage autonomous lesbianism came into existence: it vindicated lesbianism not only as a matter of sexual preference but as a political stance, which questioned heteronormativity and referred to it not only as a sexual norm but as a political regime.

CM: What is the relationship with the homosexual sexual liberation movement?

MV: It is recent; I could refer, for instance, to the phenomenon of *Planeta Paz*, which attempts to gather together groups that had not taken a stance in matters of violence, such as the feminists, the Afro groups, indigenous peoples and the sexual diversity movements, as they were then called. It sought to rally them around the purpose of peace: the common slogan was "my body, first territory of peace". They wanted to show that the body is not only political; to re-signify the old feminist slogan that what is personal is political; show that what is most personal, the body, is a territory of peace. Here there was a convergence of different movements; there were alliances between feminists, lesbians, and gays, and some trans, like Samanta Díaz, began to appear.

CM: According to the conversation I had with Diana Navarro, it seems to be that although the "T" is included, there has not been an active work in favor of trans persons in organizations such as *Colombia Diversa*.

MV: It is true that it has been difficult, and this has to do with the Colombian cultural matrix, which is very conservative. We have been sort of very gradualistic.

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

CM: But before we go on to another subject, I want to dwell upon the question of these alliances you forged during the 1970s. I also wanted to ask you about the leftist movements. Is there an alliance, a relationship or a breaking off? Because I know that in many contexts, left-wing organizations have rejected homosexuality.

MV: The Colombian left wing has traditionally been androcentric; besides, the revolutionaries want to affirm a certain triumphant virility, and that virility is heterosexual. I think that part of the left wing's difficulties with subordinate masculinities is that they want to establish the revolution in virile terms. That prevents the existence of alliances; there is tolerance provided non-heterosexual persons do not display their sexual preferences publicly, but they do not make sexuality a political issue, it is confined to a personal status: live as you wish, but do not make that preference a political matter. Nothing to do with the feminist slogan – what is personal is political. It is the complete opposite. Then, in that respect, the Colombian left wing has been very conventional. The communist party, the MOIR, Trotskyism, the Socialist League, the M-19 offer no alternative, neither do guerrilla groups. What has been commented is that gender identity inside the guerrilla has been quite conventional. We have witnessed no questionings of gender and sexuality on the part of the left wing; in that sense, conditions were not propitious to generate alliances with the sexual diversity movements, which were very fragmentary. The left wing had a revolution proposal in social terms, a revolution with the theoretical matrix of Marxism, which assigns a very great importance to class, and the main enemy is capitalism, not the patriarchal system or obligatory heteronormativity. Thus, as new social movements begin to emerge, a space for the emergence of a sexual diversity movement, a movement of sexual vindications is generated. But those are minority issues.

CM: I suppose that, from the governmental perspective, the Colombian armed conflict has relegated the discussion of these types of issues. Have they remained a secondary concern in the face of the devastating reality of violence in Colombia?

MV: Yes, but considering other Latin American countries where conflicts and violence have not been so significant, Costa Rica, for instance, they did not include the issue of sexuality in their agendas, either. That is to say, it is the convergence of many things; they are ideas that begin to circulate at the international level and it also has to do with what is happening in the United States, which finds an echo in questions in Colombia, in Brazil, in Latin America.

CM: I would like to know what this delay could be attributed to. Is it a question of religion?

MV: Yes, when you posed the question the most spontaneous thing was to say Catholicism, the Catholic cultural matrix, that is, independently of people being practicing Catholics or not, Catholicism has been very important in terms of the definition of the Colombian national identity. When one spoke of what defined the Colombian national identity around 1991, it was a single language, a single race, and a single religion, that is, the religion that was there as something that defined what being Colombian was; to be Colombian one had to be a Catholic. Catholicism as a cultural matrix and not as a religion has modeled us; it has modeled our subjectivities, we feel that on a daily basis; in that respect we are quite conservative. The case of Colombia is not like the case of Brazil, where other churches have proliferated. Despite the fact that since 1991 the presence of other minority churches began to become visible, Colombia has not repeated the experience of Brazil, or of Cuba, where there is a presence of

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

evangelical churches and also of Afro-Brazilian religions, and I think this religious diversity brings to the fore the issue of sexual diversity and of gender diversity. The Afro-Brazilian religions question fixed gender roles; Catholicism, on the other hand, is a book-based religion; book-based religions are patriarchal: Islam, Judaism, or Catholicism. The national identity was constructed around “we are all *mestizos*, we all speak Spanish, we are all Catholics”. They were three trans-class ideas; all the classes envisioned themselves in that way. Of course we were not all *mestizos*, the ideology of mixed races has been another Colombian fallacy.

CM: Then the most important blow to that dictatorship, to call it something, is the 1991 Constitution, for I notice that you have mentioned 1991 on several occasions.

MV: I believe the 1991 Constitution is significant as a crystallization of a series of concerns which had hitherto been dispersed. In that respect it is important. It provides form and legitimacy in the public space. Another thing that is conspicuous by its absence in Colombia is a public debate on these issues, for example, the issue of abortion; there are talks about abortion, not to debate on the subject but to report that a law is being submitted to Congress. There is no public debate. There is very little presence of academicians and experts in the public space, that is, here columnists are not academicians, if you compare it with Mexico or France, which is a paradigmatic country in that respect, because public debate is marked out by intellectuals. Here we academic intellectuals have no incidence on the public debate; when we are consulted, firstly, we speak in a very boring way, and secondly, there is a kind of lack of connection between the academic world and the real life world, the world of reality.

CM: Marcela Sánchez was telling me that in the past few years there has been a change in media representation, that the diverse sexual identity figures are being represented in a way that differs from the cliché.

MV: Yes. However, I would be a little less optimistic. There has been certain political correction, but I don't know if there is a profound questioning of heteronormativity. I don't think so, we have not sufficiently eroded that Catholic cultural matrix.

CM: How have you approached the questioning of heterosexualities from the perspective of class?

MV: I might situate my work on class differences as revolving around masculine identities, that is, I have carried out quite an extensive work on masculinities and I have worked on how masculinity has been constructed in different ethnic contexts. Regions, and also classes, are very racialized in Colombia. Different ethnicities are associated to certain social classes. In the issue of abortion we have made comparisons between popular and upper class sectors; in this issue, too, when faced with the decision of abortion, we see different configurations of that heterosexuality. In popular sectors, when they don't have a dominant position in society, men seek to affirm their masculinity in very physical terms, through violence. This has to do with the place they occupy in society, but I would not like to stereotype men from popular sectors as violent men, since it is a well-known fact that intra-family violence is an issue that affects the upper classes as much as it affects the popular ones.

CM: Can you talk about your work on masculinities and explain why you use the plural?

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

MV: I speak in plural because I don't believe there is a masculine identity. The masculine identity has nothing to do with men; women can also be very masculine. Another thing I deem important is that there is a great diversity of ways to construct the feeling of being a man. We might say that the masculine identity has to do with the feeling of being a man, which is a feeling that is constructed socially and culturally. I was interested in seeing how Colombian men construct their masculine identity, what does being a man mean in Colombia, what meaning is attributed to masculinity in different contexts.

I worked in Chocó and Quindío, particularly in Quibdó and Armenia, and I thought it was very interesting that, for example, in Quibdó the *chocoanos* and the *paisas* constantly coexist, in a real or an imaginary way, and that is very interesting because *paisa* in Quibdó is any person who is not a *chocoano*, meaning any white or mestizo person, any person who is not black. They are identities that are constructed in relation with the others; they are relational. There is a kind of hegemonic masculinity in Colombia which is that of the good provider, that of the monogamous, dependable man. I wrote a book entitled *De Quebradores y Cumplidores* in which I illustrate the relationship between the meaning of *cumplidor* and that of *quebrador*. It is not a question of there being *cumplidores* (dependable men) and *quebradores* (womanizers), but ideas about what being a man means in Colombia. Then the *quebradores* are the men who are successful with women, who are skillful dancers, skillful with words. In the Colombian imaginary, they are the black men, good lovers, good dancers and funny. The *cumplidores* would be the good family men, good fathers, good husbands, good economic providers, those who fulfill their duties, and in the Colombian imaginary, those would be the *paisa* men. I show that in Armenia as well as in Quibdó there are *cumplidores* and there are *quebradores*, but in each region there is a prevailing idea about what masculinity means.

CM: What is the status of homosexual masculinity within this relationship between *quebradores* and *cumplidores*?

MV: It is very important. Both in Quibdó and in Armenia, homosexual masculinity is expelled. In Armenia they said to me: the worst thing that can happen to me is to have a homosexual son; I would rather he were a thief and not a fag. In Quibdó the existence of a homosexual black man appeared to be impossible; it would be like a contradiction. There is a kind of naturalization of black heterosexuality, which implies that black homosexual men have great difficulty to establish themselves as homosexuals in Quibdó. The man from coastal regions was so sexual that he could even have homosexual relations and have relations with animals. If there is sex between men, the difference between the active and the passive man is marked, and in any case, the hyper sexual man who has sex with men is a man who penetrates; he is not a penetrated man, that is, he is not a man in a passive role. Masculinity would reside in the act of penetrating and in having a position of power, in not being passive or feminized.

CM: I remember a recent discussion about homosexuality in Iran, where only the passive man is condemned; the active man is not defined as homosexual.

MV: The same happens in Colombia. Many men who have sex with men in a sporadic way would never define themselves as homosexuals, that is, it would not affect their identity. They can be family men and relatively monogamous husbands with sporadic practices with men.

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

CM: How is the homosexual masculine identity forged in this country, within this environment of discrimination and rejection?

MV: I think this has changed over time; until a few years ago, it was something clandestine; there were codes, that is, spaces for sociability, spaces where homosexual men could meet, but there wasn't an affirmation of masculinity as something political, there was no solidarity regarding those sexual practices. But at the same time, men who engaged in homo-erotic practices could be very homophobic. That contradiction is less present today because we have progressed and we have politicized the issue of sexuality. It is more unusual to find a gay homophobic man at present, or at least he is more criticized. In Colombia there have also been migrations for sexual reasons; men have migrated from small towns to the cities in order to experience their sexuality more freely. There are also differences by social class and by age group. One of my students analyzed socializing spaces for elderly homosexual men. In Bogotá there is a pub called *Las Arrugas* (Wrinkles) which from 6 pm onwards becomes a homo-erotic meeting point, but for elderly men. This has to do with certain tyranny of age in the homosexual world, in which elderly homosexual men are discarded from the erotic market. This is, therefore, a meeting space for these elderly homosexual men who have different codes. There are different homosexualities; in the mid-1990s, Carlos Iván García and José Fernando Serrano began to talk about the homosexual scene, the *drag Queens*, *the strippers*, and the emergence of these kinds of personages in the world of show business. Young people today have the immense fortune of having been born in a context in which sexual diversity is referred to more calmly.

CM: Is there, or has there been historically, a different acceptance of homosexual men and lesbian women?

MV: Like male homosexuality, female homosexuality existed but in a clandestine way. In Colombia, the masculine presence in the home has been minimal. I think that Colombia, since colonial times, has been a country of women heads of households. Sisters lived at home, there was always a mother, an aunt, or a grandmother; the female genealogy was strong, a female friend could also live in the same house and it was not unusual that they should have a homo-erotic relationship without anyone suspecting they were lesbians. That is to say, there was more tolerance with regard to this sort of feminine solidarity. Indeed it was less visible; I think that what has changed is precisely the wish for political visibilization. At the university it was also evident; some ten years ago undergraduate theses focusing on lesbianism began to be developed, but it is a new topic, it was not an anthropological topic.

CM: Somebody was telling me that the men's trans community is not well organized, there is no leadership, or there are some leaders but it is not a community that has become politicized in the way the trans women have.

MV: Yes, I think they are very little visible. Also, at university there is a trans boy who had great difficulties; I mention this story because I think it is interesting. When that girl decided to initiate her process, she sent a letter to the Department asking for support from teachers because they had thrown stones at her at the university on grounds of her being a butch girl. The psychologist who was treating her had suggested that she request support from the Department's professors, that they organize talks referred to sexual diversity. What really impressed me was my colleagues' reaction; they said: we mustn't create a ruckus, this is a personal matter, that is, if we organize talks, we are

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

exposing her to censure. They had not yet incorporated the idea of politicizing the issue and knowing that it had social and political effects. That is, to state it was an option and that the process had to be accompanied in a political way, and not secretly, since the idea was that he leave for a while and came back as a girl. In fact he returned as a boy, but for a long time he had a strong resistance to speak about gender and sexuality.

CM: Is it currently possible to speak of gender and sexuality in Colombia?

MV: Yes, it is possible.

CM: At every level?

MV: At every level I believe it is increasingly common. I did some work on sexual education in secondary schools from different social sectors, and we saw that in popular sectors the children had concerns and they posed questions that had to do with gender and sexuality. The teachers had difficulties and I remember the contrast between those young people who, when they were delivered the course, began to relax and to talk about sexuality, condoms, and to laugh, and those teachers who said: "Hernández, please, sit properly", wanting the course on sexual education to be like a school anatomy class and that they listen to it like good students in front of a blackboard. I see a Colombia that is changing. The teachers incarnate that old Colombia, and the youths the wish for different things.

CM: Do you think this is the result of having politicized sexuality and having had a public discussion regarding these issues from a political angle of rights and responsibilities?

MV: It is the confluence of many things. I think the participation of women in the labor market erodes *machismo*, and I think we should not attribute everything to the movement. Concrete situations redefine roles, and this has been a country of women heads of households and the women have lived without men; they know they can live without men. There has been much work in popular sectors with women. With respect to sexuality, I am not so optimistic, but I believe there has been a change, which has been stronger in upper middle class, formally educated sectors. When one has nothing, masculinity becomes one of the few attributes that a boy can boast; he becomes hyper-virile, he builds masculine identities which are often violent, defensive. That hyper-virility has a lot to do with the subordinate social position; it implies a class and ethnic-racial expression.