

Self-portrait

Jorge Bracamonte Allain

In the mid-seventies I attended the most popular public school in my neighbourhood in Lima. There, at the age of fourteen, between play and homework, my schoolmate and I discovered sexuality. My first experience happened unexpectedly, without forethought, in a very surprising and pleasant way. Nothing I had experienced in my life up to that point compared.

My first feelings of pain, and all the difficult questions, did not come until much later when I was attending university. I fell in love with a person of the same sex when I was eighteen. It was a relationship in which desire got mixed up with a world full of books, music, film, male and female friends and political ideologies. The courtyard of the university's Faculty of Language and Literature was our meeting point before we set off on the path of love. After that I was constantly bothered by feelings of guilt and questions that disturbed my conscience: why must I do this? Why do I feel different from the others? What happens if others find out? And what of my family? In those days, my strategy to resist my own fears and fantasies was to disguise my first love as friendship.

At the same time I discovered my first friends from the 'circle' on weekends, in clubs and discotheques, on the volleyball field and during furtive meetings. We were a small group of youths, radically committed to being different, when we first heard of the existence of the *Movimiento Homosexual de Lima* (MHOL), the first LGBT group established in Peru.

In the mid-eighties, political violence increased in Peru and the actions of *Sendero Luminoso* (S.L.) (1) shifted the war from the countryside to the city (Lima). This civil war divided the country. Left-wing politically-active university students got caught between two fires: the one of the state which regarded everybody with a college ID card suspect, and the one of the S.L. who viewed us as fierce enemies because of our choice for democratic change.

As if that were not enough, at the end of the decade we found out that for a long time both the Shining Path and the MRTA (2) had been selectively persecuting, torturing and eliminating homosexuals in the areas where they were in control. This is how we slowly became aware of the abominations of the war, which wiped out our dreams of justice and change.

At about the same time another disaster occurred: the AIDS epidemic. The first stories were going around about persons in our immediate environment who were infected with HIV. Fearfully, and after elaborate discussions, our entire group requested the help of MHOL to conduct the first HIV/AIDS tests. One of us was found to be HIV positive. Our reaction was very immature, as we did not know what to do. We were afraid of the possibility of 'contamination'. Our selfishness prevented us from thinking about our positive comrade. In subsequent years the cases multiplied and death spread amongst our friends and prospective partners.

At the beginning of the nineties, with a Bachelor's degree in my pocket, the prospect of unemployment, broken dreams of justice and an epidemic hanging like a dark cloud over my environment pushed me to emigrate and continue my education. Mexico has not only given

216 me a chance to get my master's degree followed by my doctorate, but also to take distance from my country and heal my wounds. Between the nights of Tepito, my comrade Omar, the *Collegio de México* (University of Mexico), the well-known *Plaza de Coyoacán*, the uprising of the *Zapatistas* (3) and the gay activism in Mexico, my views and a broken spirit started to heal.

My return to Peru at the end of 1999, took me back to the college classrooms, but this time as a teacher. Together with Mema Mannarelli, Ana Gúezmes and Willy Nugent, and with the support of Manuel Burga, we developed the Gender Studies programme of the National University of San Marcos. This programme introduced the theme of sexual diversity to the university, but not in accordance with the traditional, biomedical or psychological approaches. In 2001, on behalf of the university and in cooperation with MHOL, I organised an important seminar to foster debate on the problematic relationship between sexual diversity, human rights and citizenship.

My return coincided with the final fall of the Fujimori dictatorship. (4) During the citizen's demonstrations in the streets in 2000, I was also reunited with my old left-oriented comrades and young and old LGBT activists. It was a period of hope in which we all felt equal as citizens and advocates of democracy. Soon, I decided that I had to become politically active with regard to my being sexually different. I discovered that, compared to some ten years before, LGBT activism had enriched itself, which was made possible due to democratic changes. This was manifest in the form of new leadership, new agendas and groups. At the same time, new strategies were developed. These were complicated because they expressed renewed respect for politics and an orientation towards the government, but also to criticism and cultural protest. And naturally the Gay Pride demonstrations commenced.

We are faced with important problems and challenges at this point. We have to confront a poorly informed political and homophobic, transphobic and lesbophobic class that is unable to pass a single law that recognises and warrants the citizenship of LGBT persons. In Latin America, we are among the countries with the least progress with regard to politics and policy. We are also confronted with the public interference of the hierarchy of the catholic church, which resists any recognition of rights of LGBT persons. In 2005, for instance, the episcopal conference pressured the Peruvian state to remove mention of these persons in the National Plan for Human Rights.

The legal situation of these LGBT persons is extremely difficult. With regard to human rights, all vulnerable population groups in Peru can count on a specific normative framework for the protection and benefit of their rights, with the exception of LGBT-persons and communities. For years the Congress of the Republic has systematically resisted any form of recognition of the human rights of LGBT communities. In 2006, when the Penal Code was amended and extended to cope with specific forms of discrimination, the principle of sexual orientation was explicitly excluded. And recently, when the law for equal opportunities for women was approved, again the principle of sexual orientation was not included.

This is not all. In some cases, there are discriminating norms and/or norms that encourage violence. Amongst several native population groups in the Amazon community, regulations apply that penalise homosexual men and women. Some local governments have also enacted

regulations that restrict their freedom of movement in the historical centres of the towns in which they live.

It should be noted that there have been numerous situations where the LGBT movement did not pay enough attention, being diverted in the struggle between the pro-government political lobby and the lobby of cultural resistance. We have not been able to identify ourselves in the experience of LGBT persons, marked by a history of injustice and oppression and/or based on identity, age, region, culture, gender and/or class.

The apparent existence of a 'universal LGBT person' has made it difficult to develop answers to the problems of violence against lesbian women and the struggle for autonomy over their bodies, the shock effect of the HIV-epidemic for the GBT population, the exemplary punishments and hate crimes against transsexual persons and gays in regions where the state is hardly present, and the forms of extreme violence and vulnerability that transgender persons experience.

We therefore have to be on the alert for arrogance. Nothing in LGBT activism has any meaning or ethical basis if the LGBT movement loses its capacity for indignation and emphatic bonding with the experiences of LGBT persons for whom a respected and dignified life is not guaranteed. Our movement will only survive if it is continuously able to dream, to recognise itself in its diversity, its power to resist, the power to assimilate, and to optimistically look to the horizon of another possible world with justice, joy and passion for everybody.

Legal

According to the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA), same-sex relationships are legally permitted in Peru and discrimination on the work floor based on sexual orientation is prohibited.

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Notes

- (1) The Shining Path, a Maoist guerrilla movement in Peru.
- (2) Revolutionary movement Tupac Amaru, a rival guerrilla movement in Peru.
- (3) Revolutionary movement that strives for autonomy of the Indian population and resists the neo-liberal globalization.
- (4) Fujimori was president of Peru from 1990 till 2000.