

THE REVOLUTION WILL HAVE SEQUIN DRESSES

On the changing place of LGBT rights in Cuba

By Jamie Packs

SANTA CLARA, Cuba—Behind a modest façade in this provincial capital, a group of drag queens stepped onstage with shimmering gowns pulled taut around their muscular frames. “Welcome, cretins!” one of the drag queens cried out as the show began. She was met with a deafening cheer.

Scenes like this are a common sight at El Mejunje, a local bar whose name translates to “the mixture.” Every Saturday night, members and allies of Santa Clara’s LGBT community come together for this lively show. Groups of patrons mingle in front of a maroon wall inscribed with haphazard anarchist symbols and scrawled phrases like, “Living well is the best revenge.” The smell of sweat, diesel, and alcohol permeate the bar’s open courtyard.

This scene reflects the energy that is surging through Cuba’s LGBT community. Despite a long history of persecution and continued discrimination, LGBT Cubans have emerged to claim a place in the national community—and they are doing it with gusto.

"This is the most inclusive place in Cuba," said Alex, who has been working at El Mejunje for more than 20 years. This bar, he said, was the first place in Cuba to fly the gay pride flag and was founded at a time when gay and lesbian Cubans were being forced into state-run psychiatric hospitals. Today El Mejunje is a space where members of the LGBT community can find safety and solidarity.

In the years immediately following the 1959 revolution, gatherings like those at El Mejunje would have been unimaginable. The ideal revolutionary male was bearded, virile, and macho—an image that is still enforced by the portraits of Fidel Castro and Ché Guevara that adorn nearly every public space on the island. Those who didn't fit into this ideal of the Cuban “new man” faced persecution. Gay and lesbian Cubans were banned from the Communist party, expelled from universities, and forced to undergo conversion therapy. Many gay men were also sent to agricultural labor camps run by the Cuban Government for being considered enemies of the revolution.

In 2010, the longtime Cuban leader Fidel Castro apologized for these policies, calling them “a great injustice.” By that time, things had already improved substantially for the LGBT community in Cuba. The government closed the labor camps in 1968. In 1979, same-sex sexual activity was made legal. Nearly 30 years later, the homoerotic romance of *Brokeback Mountain* was broadcast on state-controlled Cuban television—a sign that LGBT Cubans had moved towards fuller inclusion in the national community.

Cuba has also adopted a number of other progressive measures impacting the LGBT community on the island such as state-funded sex reassignment surgery as well as annual marches against homophobia.

Many of these recent advances are due in part to advocacy by Mariela Castro, daughter of President Raúl Castro and the most visible leader of the movement for LGBT rights. In 1989 Ms. Castro helped found the National Center for Sex Education, whose mission is to promote “the development of a culture of sexuality that is full, pleasurable and responsible, as well as to promote the full

exercise of sexual rights.” Since its founding, the center has played a key role in advocating for LGBT rights. Its success is due largely to the political influence Mariela Castro wields as a result of her family connections.

“Before, we didn’t have anyone to represent our interests,” said Álvaro, a philosophy student at the University of Havana. “Now we have some kind of voice. I don’t think that would have been possible without Mariela.”

Although Cuba has officially abandoned repressive policies and taken proactive steps towards addressing the needs of the LGBT community, many members of this community still face extensive harassment and discrimination. Social acceptance has extended for the most part to those members of the LGBT community who most resemble the macho figures Cuban society so admires—masculine-appearing men who aren’t open about their sexuality.

“If you act openly gay and leave glitter everywhere you go, you’re going to get harassed,” Álvaro said. He added that Cuban society also has difficulty accepting lesbians, trans people, and public displays of same-sex affection.

“Cuba is still a fundamentally *machista* society,” said Lázaro, a 25-year-old gay man living in Havana. Of the attitude that Cuban society holds towards the LGBT community he says, “It’s not quite acceptance.”

“They put up with us,” he added.

Lázaro agreed that public attitudes have improved in the past few years, but remains frustrated with the messages of freedom and unity peddled by the government.

“Unity?” he asked. “What unity?”

Given that changes in attitudes towards the LGBT community in Cuba have not been able to keep up with the legal progress that has been made, many LGBT Cubans have forged their own communities in order to find support on the local level. Spaces where this community can congregate have thus gained particular importance—spaces like El Mejunje.

At El Mejunje, LGBT patrons share space with groups of young people, the elderly, and what one employee referred to as the other "forgotten and misunderstood" residents of Santa Clara. El Mejunje also serves as a center for campaigns on HIV/AIDS prevention, and against the homophobia and discrimination that are still pervasive in Cuba.

Questions of belonging and solidarity are on everyone's mind at El Mejunje, reframing what might otherwise be an apolitical Saturday night of dancing, drinking, and conversation.

"This is who we are!" roared one of the drag queens on stage, her voice barely audible over the booming salsa music.