

PRISONERS OF COLOR

In this section, *ISLAS* will offer its readers exceptional testimonies of the victims of Cuba's prison system.

These pages have included the stories of many black Cubans who have had to endure the Cuban prison system's disdain for dignity, human integrity and justice. Now they will include new details and characteristics of a tragedy, often silenced, that has scarred thousands of Cuban families with pain and trauma—in the words of those who have actually undergone the experience.

Grievous Abyss III

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Those difficult years in prison left an indelible scar on my mutilated childhood and adolescence. Starting is the hardest thing of all, and the time had come to leave childhood behind, despite the fact I was stilling living out nightmares or truncated dreams. Having endured the common racket and noise at the prisons began for me a cruel, empty, accelerated and violent, entire world of silences: forever undressing the human being I had wanted to be and stir up all my humanity in the indignant beast's lair. Without ceasing being an adolescent, emotionally, I was supposed to break with everything in order to become a sort of animal capable of surviving so much horror, debasement and human misery all the while hardly anyone out in the world heard the sound of the pain and desperation of those condemned to the cruellest form of human degradation—silence and death. I had no other option. It was time to disappear in the dampness of those walls and

become a cruel victim unaware of my own circumstances. The sad time had arrived to never know what path my life would take, a life that was and still is in the hands of others.

1979, a year filled with pain and imprisoned in the greatest of suffering, and far from my loved ones, since fear had prevented me from letting them know I was in prison. No one in my family had ever ended up in this situation, and respect made me endure it in silence, in my innocence. For my family and friends, I was reported to have disappeared; the indolent authorities called me a benefit case; the morose hearings dragged on and on for three years and the trial never took place. Time, unstoppable, ate away at my flesh and soul: I lived as a hermit with the worst emotions, never free of daily fear of being raped in any way possible. Fear determined my morals: this was total and extreme fear.

The nights at that dark place, a fortress several centuries old, went on forever. I never

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ever tried to fall asleep, despite the hunger that tortured my senses. On many, far too numerous occasions, I was able to see exactly what went on during those nights, something I cannot get out of my mind: rising from the nauseating sheet that served as my bed, hours glued to the cold and humid floor, suffering with cramps, stuck to my mat without moving so as not to draw attention to those around me after someone who would satisfy their sexual desires one way or another.

To descriptively narrate violent acts makes no sense at all, since it is unnecessary to tell what took place on a daily basis. Some made weapons with metal springs from the cot in which they slept. We had to deal with those who got in good with the tough guys and worked to find hiding places for these weapons, especially after family visits because family members would bring *jolongs* (bags made of flour sacks or plastic) with 25 pounds of stuff including junk food, personal hygiene products, all to kill our hunger and contribute to our health. Generally, the goal with these items was to take over and control them, eat or destroy them by submerging them in water right in front of us, and touting their victories with total impunity. You had to see how the military guards broke everything they could take with them, how they took control of the sacrifices of those who were confident that they would be able to eat something extra to mitigate the nutritional crisis we were always facing.

1979. A group of prisoners rioted a certain way to claim status as political prisoners, to obtain an illegal way out of the country. The measures taken against this action were so extremely cruel they seem like fiction. In revolutionary Cuba, the authorities supported the republication of materials that contained details about what Jews who had lived

in Nazi concentration camps described and lived through, yet it is not possible to describe in words the indignant and immoral nature of what these Cuban prisoners, most of them young, went through. Words would not be enough to offer a true vision of these horrors.

Suffice it to say that the least of what these prisoners had to endure was two days of total nudity outside their cells, with no food or possibility of washing their beaten bodies. This served as an example to the rest. No one could offer them help, because you ran the risk of having to suffer the same fate. On the third day, they were literally thrown into different cellblocks, just as they were, at the mercy of whatever was to come. The military guards didn't care. The prisoners were already victims of the lustful eyes of those who enjoyed looking at their nakedness. In addition, they were labeled counterrevolutionaries and had no legal protection within those walls. What happened to many of them? How many are dead because they did not allow themselves to be further beaten? Who among them achieved their dreams of freedom without also having lost a large part of their physical and moral integrity? They were never acknowledged to be political prisoners and the Interior Minister coined the term *policomún* in referring to them, to which they had to respond. This concocted name marked them at their prisons; because of it they had to subject themselves to worse conditions for years after.

In 1979, I saw for the first time how the lives of many were in danger at that very same time. The La Cabaña prison was where it was revealed just how much the regime's anger and arrogance can do, and demonstrated how little value the Cuban authorities saw in one human life. A few prisoners came up with the brilliant idea of wanting to escape through the dining room. I don't know if someone told

on them, or they were found out, but this all led to them getting an infernal beating and 50 caliber machine guns being installed, facing the cellblocks. The guards carried large weapons and our lives remained irresponsibly at the mercy of their emotions.

The repression on account of having tried to escape lasted almost a whole, interminable week. Then there were transfers to provincial prisons in the country's interior, so the tension decreased. There were difficult hours that cannot be erased. The attitude of the officers when they retold their daily events connoted the possibility that any of us could become a victim. There were similar events at other prisons, where innocent individuals were executed as a result of example setting actions. Witnesses of these events recall that one of them said: "This is not all of them, nor all that they are," to totally confound the situation. You cannot imagine how we felt knowing that our fate was in the hands of the unpunished fickleness of a jailer capable of ending our lives.

Men who were almost done with their sentences were transferred to the mountain facilities. With all their hate and cynicism, indolent officers pushed them to remote places in our geography where the high security

prisons are located. Many were never able to go home; war had been declared against these Havana dwellers much earlier, by jailers and even other inmates. This war against prisoners from Havana began in the Province of Camagüey and yielded more than a hundred victims. Regionalism is alive and well in Cuban prisons and is supported by classes and soldiers. The best examples of these prisons are 5 1/2 (Pinar del Río), Agüica (Matanzas) and Kilo 7 (Camagüey).

In the confusion and despair to alleviate the situation at Havana prisons, many of us were sent to higher security prisons, where violence was extreme. I ended up in Nieves Morejón (Sancti Spiritus) and like the others, had to pass rows and rows of guards who took away our belongings that they believed to be unnecessary, and then by inmates, who used violence with permission of the authorities. Events, names and *los lives* live on in me, as in many other former prisoners who will write on these pages whose pain transcends even my deepest insides. They also live on in family members who also bear of this suffering, and know with great pain in their souls that one cannot love and accept forgiveness without making amends.



HAVANA

CROSSING

MAY 6-11, 2013

M-F NOON-8PM/SAT NOON-3PM

A unique, six-day, social documentary photo exhibit at YMWAHA focusing on Cuba's African descendants living in the capital city of Havana. The entire, week-long event, entitled "AFRICAMÉRICAS," will engage a multicultural cross-section of Pittsburghers by offering an historical & contemporary perspective of Afro-Cuban & Afro-Latin life. Other activities during AFRICAMÉRICAS include conversations, presentations & roundtable discussions by visiting Cuban scholars & activists, films, drum and dance workshops, and performances by Coro Latinoamericano-Pittsburgh, Balafon West African Dance Ensemble, LACU Dancers, and Slippery Rock University Afro-Colombian Dance Ensemble on Saturday, May 11.

For a full schedule of activities log on to <https://www.facebook.com/CrossingHavana/>

YOUNG MEN AND WOMENS' AFRICAN HERITAGE ASSOCIATION (YMWAHA)

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