

Noelvis: A Social Profile of Racism

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Racism in Cuba can be theoretical. This means it can and in fact does have an effect on the conceptual principles and paradigms with which we analyze ourselves as a society. The fact that there are still many today who insist there is no racism amongst us is due, in part, to the limiting and limited focus we apply.

Racism can also be, and is, institutional. We see this less because we conceive of institutions in legalistic terms, and less so in cultural or political terms. This explains why so few see the problem about which Manuel Cuesta Morúa insists so much: the racism written into Article 5 of the Constitution of the Republic of Cuba.

In its social context, the existence of racism is harder to refute, and if we consider what I see as extreme cases, it is much harder to deny that the most significant sociological phenomenon in present-day Cuba is racism, as an expression of our social structure.

My goal with this article is to continue my prior, ongoing attempt to show how real, flesh-and-blood humans, express racism, and how we can humanely document the structural inhumanity there is in a model that was supposedly designed for the poorest of people.¹

Noelvis Ortiz Rodríguez, a 40 year-old woman, is a black Cuban citizen who lives in

the Municipality of Manzanillo (Granma Province). She is the mother of two children and already has a grandson. She has been bedridden for ten years, precisely the amount of time that the Centro de Rehabilitación Las Praderas [The Las Praderas Rehabilitation Center], in the Playa municipality, in the City of Havana province, has been providing services to convalescents like Noelvis, except that all of them are from other countries. Noelvis suffers from full-body osteoporosis, rheumatoid arthritis, constricted joints, and, since childhood, third degree asthma. At 39, she had surgery for hyperthyroidism. Her painful health conditions are exacerbated by the horrible conditions in which she lives.

In spite of all this, citizen Noelvis Ortiz has not and does not receive the care she needs. She is also not being rehabilitated because she lacks the money to regularly pay for transportation to and from the hospital. Only after nine years, was a children's wheelchair sold to her and, logically, she does not fit in it. Physical therapy technicians do not visit her, thus her situation is ever worsening. From an economic point of view, Noelvis Ortiz Rodríguez has only the extremely insufficient help she receives from the State, and a paltry contribution that her son makes to her from his own miserly salary. She has had to abandon



Noelvis Ortiz



Noelvis's bed and commode



Rear view of Noelvis's home



Ceiling of Noelvis's house

her home because it is in danger of collapsing, which has sent the entire family scrambling to distribute themselves in the homes of others.

What else does this story reveal about social racism? Just how deeply rooted it is structurally. Noelvis is one more example, and an extreme one, of what will become the norm in Cuba over the next decade: the racialization of differences in what we might call the Brazilianization of Cuba—a white, prosperous group with upward mobility and ever increasing access to the world of information, and a black and *mestizo* one that is ever descending into poverty, with no upward mobility that is distanced from a wellbeing that is artificially constructed. In other words, it is not connected to productivity, except by chance, or to opportunities, for those who can find them. Instead, they endure all the effects of reforms designed by those whites in power to benefit only whites, or that third of the black and *mestizo* population that manages to slip through the loopholes of power and our new social structure.

The horror of Noelvis Ortiz's misery reminds us of what we must begin to do so that the racial equality for which we struggle in Cuba begins to manifest itself, not only in an intellectual, culture and political debate, but also in affirmative social action that can imbue our discussions with real meaning.

That is our basic challenge: making real the ideas we express, so a situation like that of Noelvis can be met head on, and we can say to her, and show her, what we have done with our ideas—find concrete ways to free her from her ostracized condition, so she can work on her future.

Note:

1- Llópis Prendes, Gloria. "El hueco." *ISLAS* 6: 19 (2011): 29-31.