

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 Abiss I

Guillermo Ordoñez Lizama
Executive Secretary, *Citizens' Observatory against
Discrimination* (OCD)
Independent journalist
Havana, Cuba

My youth was truncated and traumatized by the unquestionable arbitrariness of a so-called, revolutionary, judicial system that destroys lives and tramples the rights and dignity of human beings—often before the silence or indifference of international delegates and observers. That day, I was snatched up off the street, from my family, sports, and my youthful dreams. I woke up in shock and disbelief to a sad but true reality quite different from the one inspired by the Cuban government's well-written speeches and propaganda. No one explained to me why this was happening; it seemed to have been for no apparent reason.

It is a typical, early winter morning; there is a cold drizzle and bone-chilling humidity. Fear digs deeper into my soul. I am about to permanently enter a world entirely unknown to me, foreign to any imaginable reality. Bad things can also seem like miracles; recounting them as they actually happened seems like a lie. Yet, there is nothing more like a lie than a miracle.

A fifteen year-old life cut down by revolutionary effervescence: “We will be like *el Che*” and other slogans, “opportunities,” and so much more for which “blacks” had to be grateful to the revolution, prevent against “ideological diversionism” in our actions; the large masses of impassioned and dreaming children transported in unsafe trucks to do voluntary work, building dairy plants, filling little, polyethylene bags for the “Cordón de La Habana” [Havana Sugar Belt] agricultural plan, the expansion of the Cerro stadium (now destroyed), in a sweep that never eradicated marihuana or prostitution. Youth scarred by long, interminable speeches full of harangues “against the enemy” given by an already octogenarian, maximum leader, and that always ended with “Patria o Muerte” [Homeland or Death]. Just when I should be shaping my way of being according to everything that was forcefully drummed into me, I found a reality that had never been described to me. I cannot speak of frustration, since someone who has not achieved his dreams is not frustrated. He just becomes lost.



Guillermo Ordóñez Lizama (right) with the leader of the Colombian Cimarron Movement, Juan de Dios Mosquera

I was fifteen years-old when the century-gated gates of the Morro of the Three Magi forever opened before my eyes. Then came the penetrating screech of hinges on the gigantic gates, with their bars, and a red sign adorning the innumerable whitewashed walls. Today, this is a recreational area for tourists from all over the world, and for thousands of Cubans; it contains a saga and memories of incurable sorrow and pain.

There are constant metallic noises, the hustle and bustle of men dressed in blue denim, rows of prisoners moving one way or another, the swarming of sullen, silent faces, unintelligible sounds emerging from some of those mouths—which I barely understood—directed to those of us who had just entered their world. This was not at all encouraging to someone who knew himself to be completely innocent of the crime of theft with which the National Revolutionary Police had charged me.

The classic: ‘Hey, you! The new one! Where are you from?’ And then silence, since there is no one there from your neighborhood that you should know. How does one suddenly arrive at the underworld’s mecca, the capital of the marginalized? Everything around me continues being confused and equidistant. There is the figure of a fat, slovenly sergeant with a bayonet in hand, talking to some men, who then give orders to others, who then give us orders, and push us towards different, confusing tunnels containing never-ending rows of triple-layered, rarified bunk beds with human figures quite different from the typical image of normal men.

This was my hazy initiation to my first year being turned into a toilet bucket, which they counted at least twice a day, my arrival at the world of non-people. How could one imagine this city of haze beyond the city of light?

My auditory senses receive the gift of new sounds, an imprecise yet entire world where I could not allow myself a tear because of the strangeness of my new condition. Suddenly, a bundle of huge, coarse, ill-odorous clothes is in my hands: 'Come on! Get going! This way! We have to take you the jeep!' Someone indicates to me that I should sit on an improvised barber's chair, where another prisoner does the work of a barber, disinterested and unstylishly. In the distance, the sticky shadow of the fat guard, who seemed to have haughty authority in that place of human terror and misery.

Right after that, there is great confusion; all at once everyone runs wild in a certain direction, and one man is left all alone in that space. An ill-smelling liquid containing feces is dripping down from his head, and covering his body. Insults are shouted. The corpulent guard moves with extraordinary agility, interferes, and puts an end to the confusion, his impressive blue eyes ablaze on his fleshy face. Chaos becomes order, more or less.

Eleuterio Sánchez Reina, a sergeant punished because of what happened during the escape from Castillo del Príncipe, also known as the Havana Prison, a typical, corrupt, abusive jailer, knew every possible tricky thing that could happen behind those walls. Eleuterio Sánchez Reina, with his big boss attitude, who followed and manipulated anything that was going on with the prison's population; a despot; a dehumanized flunkey dressed in olive green, a uniform symbolizing sorrow.

A group of us was shouted at and shoved, and entered a tunnel with the number 6. There is a tenuous, yellowish light from an incandescent bulb about 5 meters from the floor; that is all the lighting there is in the place. The sergeant speaks to one of the men at the door: 'Hey, Pancho. Here!' He, who is black and

short, and wearing a shiny, starched uniform, tells us where we should stand.

After entering that galley, decorated with a poster bearing the image of the *Granma* yacht, and allegorical, revolutionary slogans, Pancho, the Midget, tell us what the rules of the game are. This dark-skinned guy, who looks like a tropical Fouché, a man marked since childhood by reform schools, the product of a degrading prison reform system, and marginal neighborhoods not done away with by the revolutionary process, has been a tough-man overlord for years. The classes and soldiers of the Ministry of the Interior (MININT) have supported him. The Midget orders each one of us to where we should go, giving us each a coarse and fetid canvas roll. We walk down unending rows of triple-leveled bunks jammed full of starving, malnourished men, as afraid as we are, but accustomed to the gloominess of a situation we would be in from that moment on.

January 6, 1977. 5:20PM. A Christmas gift. Morro Castle closes down as a prison, as an underworld governed by indolent military men who abuse their charge with defenseless prisoners crushed and plunged into being ill-odorous toilet buckets, plagued by parasites, forced to practice the survival of the fittest—whether innocent or not—all guilty, and suffering the same fate.

There were more than 400 of us who were under 21 standing under that persistent rain. We were transferred to La Cabaña prison, another horrid place. Badly uniformed military men escorted us with long weapons; they are backed up by endless rows of soldiers as young as we are, victims of the Mandatory Military Service.

First Lieutenant Ferreiro, Lieutenant Argota, Sargeant Villafaña, Sargeant Eleuterio Sánchez, and Sargeant Fermín. Jackals who in



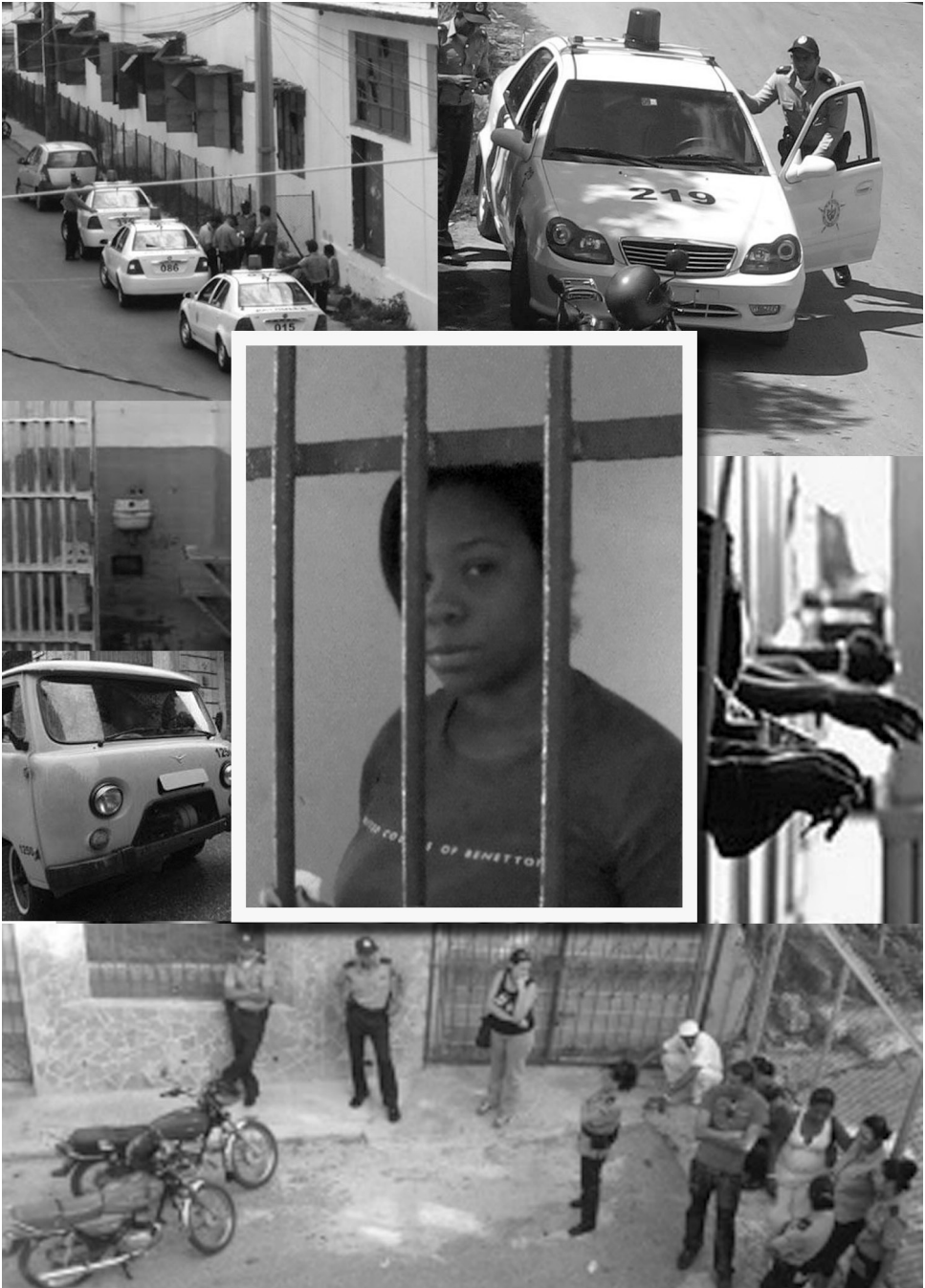
While numerous activists from the Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration were being arrested, in order to stop them from participating in the invitation-only event at the Cofradía de la Negritud, on May 20th, 2012, an event to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of when the Independent Party of Color (PIC) initiated its armed uprising, Executive Secretary of the Citizens' Observatory against Discrimination, Guillermo Ordóñez Lizama, who was able to enter the space, took the floor to immediately denounce this increased repression and reaffirm the commitment of Cuba's anti-racist fighters to the ideals promoted a hundred years ago by the PIC's leaders and members.

their unquenchable thirst for haughtiness and despotism subjected us to the cruelest, limitless martyrdom; they knew how much sexual assault went on in the galleys over which they were supposed to have complete and efficient control, for the reeducation of all who were crowded in there.

With his haggard body, Eleuterio Sánchez Reina, whose only interest was the delivery of the mess that was supposed to feed us; all this so he, with his blue eyes sunken deep into his fat face, could look and sniff around at the food, and see what he could eat. Reeducation Lieutenant Argota, hardly interested in his work, a revolutionary imposter, incorrigible liar, got off sending us to dirty, rat-lice-bedbug-and-roach-infested punishment cells. This proved how little human life mattered to him more than any particular punishment

he could have designed on his own. Sargeant Villafaña, an unscrupulous jailer, and robber of belongings, who more than once was seen with possessions of others, which were never given back to their real owners, whose families had made sacrifices to give them.

The story of this and other prisons is alive, it is still here, fully crying out, shrieking out to be told; it is in the hands of men scarred by indelible consequences who will never allow them to be refuted. This experience may be Dantesque, but it is real. These are the tormenting phantoms that erupt into the present moments of each and every one of us who managed to stay alive. Without being mentally broken, we embody the shards resulting from another of the errors committed by a revolution that are still being repeated today.



Eleanor Calvo Martínez behind bars for attending an event commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the *Independent Party of Color's* armed protest demanding their rights as citizens, on May 20th, 1912.