

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 IV: A Fatuous Light on the Way

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The spring of 1980 was an extremely important and traumatic moment for Cuban society. Aside from the first mass demonstration of discontent and rejection against the regime, once again the Cuban authority's capacity for intolerance and indolence became obvious. At that very instant of massive exodus and flagrant disrespect for the dignity and integrity of those who expressed their rejection of the revolution, Cuban prisons were the scene of a vortex of unprecedented brutality and arbitrariness.

There, amidst the solitude and silence, which competed in the fear and horror of this prison's shadows, we too had our well-hidden hopes. There is no documentation of this. Even our own tormentors did not know anything about this. What is certain is the curtain of silence behind which they hid the pitiful and bitter episodes thousands of men and women who were forced to endure after being ordered by the Cuban authorities to leave our homeland in 1980. Those of us

who were forcefully torn from our beds and streets, won the right to return to them after serving the sentences imposed on us by society for having committed one or another mistake.

At that time, many took the uncertain road to exile via the Port of Mariel, threatened with worse or new sanctions if they did not abandon their place of birth. The left in small, overburdened vessels that came to seek out family; their owners were blackmailed into having to take on as many Cubans as the authorities designated, even mentally ill people and high-risk prisoners, all of them treated like the scum of the Earth.

News of events came to us in a confusing manner, via rumors; we secretly heard that a number of embassies had been taken by force by counterrevolutionaries, and learned that a soldier (Pedro Luis Ortiz Cabrera) had died at the Peruvian embassy after slamming the route 79 bus between Playa and Lawton (in the Diez de Octubre neighborhood) against its outside walls. None of this news came to us in an official way and inside the Cabaña prison

something strange was going on. Military men would come to the ward doors and ask us which of us was willing to serve on an internationalist mission, if the time came. This was also during the Angolan and Ethiopian wars. Desperate to escape the horror of hunger, overcrowding and abuse, many signed up for the supposed internationalist adventure, despite the fact the freedom to which they'd be escaping, if it could materialize, could cost them their lives. Other knew they'd be cannon fodder, but opted to live in prison, which was as much a torture then as now.

I personally recall how this all went down for those who due to imposition, audacity, lack of experience, hope or fear had to leave for the United States, and leave behind family members who every never know anything of where they would end up. Even today, there are those who know nothing of people who never came back to Cuba.

Geraldo López Madan (Kiki) was taken from his home and sent into exile a month after having paid his debt to society, finished a prison term, paid his debt to society and believed himself capable of reintegrating into society. By explicit order of the local Section Head of the National Revolutionary Police (PNR), officers showed up at his home (Calle San José, between Gervasio and Belascoain, Centro Habana) and threatened him into leaving Cuba, or else they would disappear him. He knew that people were holed up at embassies but he had no interest in leaving his country and family to go into exile. Yet, the authorities forced him by charging and arresting him again however they saw fit.

After more than ten years in prisons, an atrocious life in the U.S., and having his youth stolen from him, López Madan is today an 'excludable' (he was returned to Cuba by the U.S. government) deprived of most of his citizen's rights. He lives enduring the stigma of a life truncated and undone by someone who decided he should be banished. He is one more discrimi-

nated person in a society that denied him the ability to shape up and join it again.

May 6, 1980, he had to secretly take leave of the few family members who were allowed to know what was going on. Similarly, he departed for a place unknown with an overwhelming fear because vigilante hordes would surround the homes of family members who stayed behind in their homes, which were splattered with eggs and nearly demolished by attacks.

Possessing little documentation, he presented himself to the PNR station in Marianao and said he wanted to leave for the United States. He was forced into this expatriation, which he did not expect, and was denied the sacred right to do what he wanted with his freedom. Once in the U.S., he once again served a prison term. He was forcefully separated from his young son, who then had to grow up with the stigma of having an absent father.

Today, Geraldo López Madan is just one more guy on the corners of his Havana neighborhood; he is one of so many fathers who blame themselves for not having been able to teach their children. Most recently, he suffered the blow of his son being killed, a son he was not able to raise, a son who perhaps heard stories about his father that propelled him into socially unacceptable behavior.

Expatriation thanks to and by order of the supreme leader made the lives of so many men and women who were forcibly removed from prisons and psychiatric hospitals hard and sad. This is a painful, indelible mark on the soul of our nation and on an image of the men in power, who shield themselves by employing a demagogic rhetoric that tramples human rights and values on behalf of their own, mean-spirited and miserly interests.

Three decades later, with total impunity and making no amends, the Cuban authorities ignore the great many men and women who suffer what those in power have opted to call an error of the revolution.