“I HOPE THEY DON’T COME TO PLAINS”: RACE AND THE DETENTION OF MARIEL CUBANS, 1980-1981

by

ALEXANDER MAXWELL STEPHENS

(Under the Direction of Bethany E. Moreton)

ABSTRACT

In 1980, roughly 125,000 Cubans sailed to the United States in a mass migration that became known as the Mariel boatlift. Labeled "scum" by Fidel Castro, many of the Cubans who crossed the Straits of Florida found themselves stigmatized again in the United States, as rumors spread that their government used the boatlift to empty its prisons and mental institutions. Criminalized and caught in the middle of a changing U.S. refugee policy, tens of thousands of Mariel migrants were sent to makeshift detention centers on military bases. Black and *mulato* Cubans made up a disproportionate number of the people confined to these carceral spaces. Although scholars have been critical of the stigmatization and detention of people from Mariel, few have explored fully the ways that race shaped this process. This thesis analyzes the various forms of power that contributed to the racialized consequences of the boatlift.

INDEX WORDS: Mariel boatlift, International migration, Detention, Incarceration, Refugee policy, Race, Cuba, United States

“I HOPE THEY DON’T COME TO PLAINS”: RACE AND THE DETENTION OF MARIEL CUBANS, 1980-1981

by

ALEXANDER MAXWELL STEPHENS

BA, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2016

© 2016

Alexander Maxwell Stephens

All Rights Reserved

“I HOPE THEY DON’T COME TO PLAINS”: RACE AND THE DETENTION OF MARIEL CUBANS, 1980-1981

by

ALEXANDER MAXWELL STEPHENS

Major Professor:	Bethany E. Moreton
Committee:	Reinaldo L. Román
	Steven C. Soper

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2016

A 1980 exodus of a hundred and twenty-five thousand dreams,
A quest to find out what freedom really means at any cost,
Boatloads of Cubans lost in a maze of red tape, and hate.

--Will Da Real One, *El Mariel*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As with any piece of writing, this thesis is the result of countless contributions from other people, and I will not be able to recognize all them here. I do want to use this opportunity to thank a few friends and mentors. Bethany Moreton encouraged me to pursue this subject from the moment I mentioned it to her and she was gracious enough to stay on as my advisor, even as she faced multiple moves and new responsibilities in new places. Her consistent guidance, incisive comments, and unwavering public commitments have made her an ideal mentor. Reinaldo Román kept his door open throughout this process and, despite his many responsibilities as Director of Graduate Studies, always took time to sit with me and help me wrestle with my questions about race and history in the U.S. and Cuba. His brilliance is exceeded only by his modesty, and if I have managed to convey anything significant about the nature of race-in-motion around the Caribbean, it is because of him. Steve Soper offered encouragement and gentle critiques that transcended the spatial and temporal boundaries often observed within the discipline. His presence on my committee gave me confidence to undertake the task of writing a fine-grained account of a relatively small group of incarcerated people in order to learn about something larger. His generosity as a reader is beyond compare, and I have done my best to integrate as many of his sharp insights as possible.

Although Jamie Kreiner was not officially a member of my committee, she might as well have been. Her close reading of my work pushed me to find ways to convey ideas more precisely, and our many conversations were essential to this project. I am grateful to her for her friendship and for opening my eyes to the vast array of possible ways to think and write about history. Dan Rood took an interest in my intellectual development early in my first semester, and our conversations created a foundation for this project. He pushed me to think more critically about race and political economy in the Americas and, while I have just begun to explore this literature, he reinforced the importance of reading and listening to the people who 'know' racial capitalism because they have borne its weight. Steve Berry, in his seminar and in the time he spent helping me talk through this project, pushed me to think more deeply about the human stories that make up this history. His insistence on striving to tell these stories beautifully will remain an impetus for improving my writing. Likewise, when I was considering applying to graduate school, Christopher Lawton reminded me that historians are storytellers. His camaraderie and advice throughout the past several years have been invaluable in more ways than I can mention here. Finally, although he will likely deny any involvement if questioned about it, Jim Cobb left his mark on this thesis. His raised eyebrow and I became well-acquainted during his final Southern History colloquium at UGA. Although some might not see this as a "southern history" project, Dr. Cobb's dedication to reimagining and reshaping the field throughout his career gave me the confidence to claim it as such. I will always admire and seek to emulate his commitment to finding and telling truths about the place that he loves.

My friends and fellow graduate students at UGA have read drafts of my work and provided crucial feedback. My cohort—Kiersten Rom, Nicole Gallucci, Kate Dahlstrand, and Michele Johnson—consists of some of the brightest, funniest, and kindest people I know. Kiersten has been my friend, confidant, and good-natured critic for three years, willing to tell me when I was being ridiculous and always quick to share a laugh or lend encouragement. Nicole is a tremendous scholar and an incredibly generous friend. She never stopped me when I turned around in the office to tell her something about the Mariel boatlift, or a Pitbull music video, or anything else, and for that I will always be grateful. As I started the graduate program, Ashton Ellett quickly became a guide to the department. Since then, he has become a friend who keeps me on my toes, helps me maintain my sanity, and reminds me why we are in this line of work.

My family instilled in me commitments to doing things well and to working for a more just world, which continue to drive everything I do. They have put up with me during my lowest points, understood when I was not around, and celebrated when the time was right. This thesis would not have been written without their love and support. Much and more can and should be said about Marcela Reales Visbal. Her endless patience and understanding are matched only by her intellect and selflessness. She listened to every thought I ever had about this thesis and she never refused to engage with me in conversations about the ideas swirling around inside my head. Nobody contributed to this project more than she did, which I hesitate to admit only because of how small and imperfect the result is. The flaws in what is written here reflect nothing but my own limitations.

Lastly, I want to express my gratitude to Della Pollock, Hudson Vaughan, and all the mentors and friends at the Jackson Center and around Northside who led me down the path I am walking. They taught me how to feel history, deeply, and to see its everyday ways. I owe a particular debt to Ms. Keith Edwards. Her willingness to struggle against seemingly impossible odds keeps my own challenges in perspective. Her example encourages me to fight, and not just for myself. The people whose stories are at the center of this thesis were searching for home; Ms. Keith taught me what it means to find it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS v

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION 1

2 "JUST A BUNCH OF CRIMINALS" 20

3 "THE HOLY AND SACRED LAND OF FREEDOM CITY" 49

4 "TO THINK THAT SOME REFUGEES ARE BETTER THAN OTHER REFUGEES" 82

5 CONCLUSION 115

BIBLIOGRAPHY 121

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"*¡Que se vayan!*" was the repeated roar of the crowd that gathered in Havana on May 1, 1980. Their refrain punctuated Fidel Castro's annual address with an emphatic message: *good riddance*. The audience listened to Castro discredit the tens of thousands of Cubans who were seeking to leave the island at the time. He called the aspiring emigrants "scum" and "lumpen." They were enemies of Cuban socialism. They would not be missed.[1]

People in the U.S. were not as certain what to call the roughly 125,000 people who voyaged across the Straits of Florida in the span of just a few months. Initial press coverage consisted mainly of portraits of people who joined the "Freedom Flotilla" to reunite with family members in Florida. It was easy for many in the U.S. to celebrate people they saw as dissidents from the land of Fidel Castro, the "bearded tyrant."[2] A little over a week after the boatlift began, however, reports began to spread that Cuban officials had forced captains to take on large groups of unknown passengers. Fears that some of them came out of mental institutions and prisons became the focus of national press coverage. Cuban state media instigated these concerns by claiming that the people leaving from Mariel were "delinquents, social deviants, vagrants, and parasites."[3] For several weeks, it seemed that every article published about the boatlift in the U.S. contained some reference to the "criminal element" among the new arrivals.[4] Federal officials quickly determined that the sensationalist accounts had little basis in fact, but that did not spare the reputation of the "*marielitos*," a condescending term that older Cuban immigrants coined for the new arrivals.

---

[1] Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso Pronunciado Por El Comandante En Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz" (speech), May 1, 1980, Havana, Cuba, *Discursos e intervenciones del Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz, Presidente del Consejo de Estado de la República de Cuba*, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1980/esp/f010580e.html (accessed November 22, 2015). Translations are the author's.

[2] Associated Press, "Graham: Florida's a 'Caribbean State,'" *Miami News*, May 5, 1980.

The Cuban exiles and migrants who had entered the United States in earlier years received the benefits afforded to refugees; their compatriots from Mariel did not. The 1980 Refugee Act, passed just a month before the Mariel boatlift began, narrowed the category of "refugee" to individuals who had a "well-founded fear of persecution." Cubans were no longer automatically included in this group.[5] Jimmy Carter was up for reelection, though, and sending Cubans back to the island was not good politics in Florida. Doing so would have brought charges of hypocrisy, as well, since Carter was known for his investment in human rights around the globe. On May 5, he announced his support for the Cuban migrants and called on the country to welcome them with "an open heart and open arms."[6]

But there were forces shaping reactions to Mariel that Carter did not fully appreciate. His mother, on the other hand, seemed to understood them quite well. In September, three months after her son declared the arms of the nation officially open, Lillian Carter made her own statement regarding the new immigrants. In a conversation with students at a high school in Jackson, Mississippi, someone asked the president's mother about the recent arrivals from Cuba.

---

[3] "Editorial: La Posición de Cuba," *Granma*, April 13, 1980, translated and quoted in María Cristina García, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 56.
[4] Morton Lucoff, "U.S. To Begin in Processing Refugees," *Miami News*, May 1, 1980.
[5] Ruth Ellen Wasem, "Cuban Migration to the United States: Policy and Trends," CRS Report for Congress (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 2, 2009). 2.
[6] Jimmy Carter, "League of Women Voters Remarks and a Question and Answer Session at the League's Biennial" (speech), May 5, 1980, Washington, DC, *The American Presidency Project*, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33365 (accessed April 30 2015).

As she considered her response, Mrs. Carter likely thought about the possibility of Cuban "criminals" settling in Plains, her hometown in southwest Georgia. Perhaps she recalled images from the news showing that, for the first time in recent memory, a wave of Cuban immigration included a significant number of people with dark skin. In any case, her response was clear. "I'll tell you the truth," she said, "I hope they don't come to Plains."[7]

Fidel Castro's crowd had shouted their desire—"*¡que se vayan!*"—for the people in Mariel Harbor to leave. Yet from Plains, Georgia, to Miami, Florida, to just about every other place the Mariel migrants went, there were people who hoped they would not come. Most accounts of the Mariel boatlift have characterized the rejection of the new migrants as the product of a widespread perception that the group was somehow criminal or deviant. A number of scholars have attributed this reaction to unfair representations in news media. Yet rarely have such studies of the boatlift positioned race at the center of their analysis in order to understand how it was threaded through notions of the group's "undesirability" and how it profoundly shaped the experiences of the black and *mulato* people who made the voyage. In popular media, the recent trend has been to focus on the stories of people who made it—those who defied the stereotypes and lived lives widely regarded as "successful." This thesis is about people who have not had their photographs in celebratory retrospectives—people who *fit* the stereotypes in the eyes of many observers. The goal of this study is to illustrate the ways that racialized forms of institutional, legal, economic, and social power worked on Mariel migrants to move them through an ad hoc system of incarceration.

---

[7] United Press International, "Don't Want Cubans Here: Carter's Mom," *Montreal Gazette*, September 25, 1980.

Race and Mariel

In 1981, sociologists Robert L. Bach, Jennifer B. Bach, and Timothy Triplett published a study featuring what remains the most reliable demographic information about Cubans from Mariel. Much of their work focused on the migrants the government sent to makeshift detention centers, which the Carter administration deemed "resettlement camps." Crucially, the authors found that a disproportionate number of those detained were black or *mulato*. Bach, Bach, and Triplett suggested that race may have informed the stigma associated with the new group of immigrants but noted, "To what extent this new racial component influenced the unprecedented negative portrayal of Cuban emigrants is a question that few have asked, let alone answered."[8] Over 35 years later, this question has yet to be answered sufficiently.

In time, a consensus emerged among scholars that contrary to common perceptions, most Mariel migrants were not formerly incarcerated people or patients from mental health institutions. Many studies of the Mariel boatlift also have noted that the summer of 1980 was the first time since the 1959 revolution that a significant number of black and *mulato* Cubans migrated to the United States. Compared to just 3 percent of the Cubans who migrated to the U.S. in the two decades prior to 1980, up to 40 percent of the Mariel migrants were black or *mulato*.[9] In the years since the boatlift, sociologists and geographers have described ways that race affected the wages and living conditions of Cubans in the United States, journalist Mirta Ojito—herself a Mariel migrant—has written insightfully about the disparate experiences of black and white Cubans in the United States, and historians have tentatively suggested that racism may have contributed to reactions to the boatlift.[10] Social scientists, who have dominated the literature on the Mariel boatlift and its aftermath, have tended to approach race as a variable within a process of "assimilation" or "adaptation" rather than as a facet of identity and community formation or as a potent construct in societies structured by white supremacy.[11] On the whole, scholars have not illustrated precisely how race shaped the lives of black and *mulato* Cubans from Mariel. Nor have previous studies offered an adequate explanation for why so many of the new migrants with darker skin were detained in 1980 or locked up and ruled "excludable" from entry to the U.S. at some point over the course of the next decade.[12] This thesis seeks to demonstrate the profound effects of race and racism during the Mariel boatlift and to show *how* race and power did work on human lives to produce disparate consequences.

---

[8] Robert L. Bach, Jennifer B. Bach, and Timothy Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants': Latest and Most Controversial," *Cuban Studies* 11, no. 2 (1981): 33.

[9] García, *Havana USA*, 68. I use the English term "black" and the Spanish term *"mulato"* to maintain the distinction typically made in Cuba between people with complexions and other physical features primarily associated with African ancestry and people with complexions and some features primarily associated with European ancestry. In the United States, people in the latter group may have identified as—or been perceived as—either "black" or "biracial."

---

[10] Thomas D. Boswell, "Racial and Ethnic Change and Hispanic Residential Segregation Patterns in Metropolitan Miami, 1980," LACC Occasional Papers Series, Dialogue #81 (Florida International University, 1987), http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/laccopsd/58; Emily H. Skop, "Race and Place in the Adaptation of Mariel Exiles," *International Migration Review* 35, no. 2 (2001): 449–71; Madeline Zavodny, "Race, Wages, and Assimilation among Cuban Immigrants," *Population Research and Policy Review* 22, no. 3 (2003): 201–19; Silvia Pedraza, "Los Marielitos of 1980: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality," vol. 14 (Cuba in Transition, Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 2004), 89–102; Mirta Ojito, "Best of Friends, Worlds Apart," *New York Times*, June 5, 2000; Felix Roberto Masud-Piloto, *From Welcomed Exiles to Illegal Immigrants: Cuban Migration to the U.S., 1959-1995* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); García, *Havana USA*.

[11] This reflects the pervasive influence of the positivist "Chicago School" of sociology, which gained prominence under the leadership of Robert E. Park in the 1920s and has largely dominated the sociological study of migration in the United States.

[12] Approximately 62,000 people were sent to detention centers outside of the Miami area shortly after they arrived. A disproportionate number of the people initially sent to these locations were black or *mulato*, and the percentage of black and *mulato* people in these "camps" grew dramatically over the course of the next year. Although outside the scope of this thesis, in subsequent years, thousands of Cubans were held indefinitely in federal prisons. These were people whom immigration judges classified as "excludable" under provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act. Many were convicted of relatively minor offenses. Once again, a disproportionate number of them were black or *mulato.* There have been a handful of studies focused on this group, all of which mention the racial composition of the detainees, but these works generally do not include a thorough critique of race. See Renaldo Smith, "The Cuban Detainee Uprising and Riot at the Atlanta Penitentiary November 23, 1987" (MA thesis, Atlanta University Center, 1988); Mark S. Hamm, *The Abandoned Ones: The Imprisonment and Uprising of the Mariel Boat People* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995); Mark Dow, *American Gulag: Inside U.S. Immigration Prisons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Jana K. Lipman, "A Refugee Camp in America: Fort Chaffee and Vietnamese and Cuban Refugees, 1975-1982," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 33, no. 2 (2014): 57.

Race and Cubans in the United States

The lack of attention to race in studies of the Mariel boatlift reflects a larger trend in scholarship on Cuban migration to the United States. By focusing on race, this thesis contributes to efforts to deconstruct the myth of the "Cuban success story," which emphasizes the economic and political achievements of Cuban exiles and migrants. This narrative obscures the history of Cubans who entered the U.S. prior to the revolution of 1959 and distorts the history of those who entered after that date. The "success story" is closely linked to what historian Nancy Raquel Mirabal calls the "exile model," which positions the group of people who left the island soon after the Cuban Revolution as the norm.[13] In the 1960s, Cubans in the U.S. gained a reputation for being the privileged members of a "Golden Exile."[14] For those who left or fled the island between 1959 and 1962, there was some truth to that notion. The majority of the 250,000 Cubans who entered the U.S. during those years were, as Jorge Duany has described them, "urban, middle-aged, well-educated, light-skinned, and white-collar workers."[15] Moreover, Cuban exiles and migrants between 1960 and 1980 were the recipients of what María Cristina García has termed the "most comprehensive refugee assistance program in American immigration history," and generally they received a warm welcome during the early years of the Cold War in the U.S. because they were perceived as refugees of communism.[16] However, these peculiarities have been obscured in much of the historical and sociological literature on Cuban migration, which has centered on the experiences of people who entered the U.S. after the 1959 revolution and settled in the Miami area.[17] The scale and timing of these relatively recent waves of migration, as well as the growing wealth, influence, and visibility of Cubans in southern Florida, contributed to popular notions that Cubans in Miami, especially those who entered the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, were representative of all Cubans.

---

[13] Nancy Raquel Mirabal, "'Ser de Aquí': Beyond the Cuban Exile Model," *Latino Studies* 1, no. 3 (November 2003): 371.

[14] "Those Amazing Cubans," *Fortune*, October 1966; "Cuban Success Story in the United States," *U.S. News and World Report*, March 20, 1967.

[15] Jorge Duany, "Cuban Communities in the United States: Migration Waves, Settlement Patterns and Socioeconomic Diversity," *Pouvoirs Dans La Caraïbe* 11 (1999): 69–103.

[16] García, *Havana USA*, 2; "They're Ok," *Newsweek*, December 4, 1961

Throughout the past several decades, a number of scholars have challenged the exile model by writing about periods prior to 1959 and/or emphasizing the racial, socioeconomic, and geographical diversity of Cuban migrant communities.[18] Such work demonstrates that, situated in historical context, the "Cuban success story" is most aptly a reference to a subset of Cuban exiles and migrants who entered the U.S. during a brief period in which the federal government operated unprecedented support programs tailored to meet their needs. Even then, the "success story" obscures differences among the hundreds of thousands of people who left Cuba during that period. The false norms embedded in the exile model became particularly apparent during the Mariel boatlift, as scholars, journalists, and the public sought to understand what made the new Cuban migrants different, and whether or not it made them a threat. As Nancy Raquel Mirabal puts it, "Scholars went from asking why Cubans were so successful to why Mariel Cubans failed to be *as* successful."[19] Such questions contributed to the erroneous claim that the Mariel migrants were unlike any other Cubans in the United States, a notion that scholars and journalists continued to reproduce. For example, though some have suggested that the 1980 migrants were less educated and less skilled than earlier groups, the Cubans from Mariel were similar to the 1965-1973 wave in their occupational histories and their average level of education was higher.[20] What did distinguish the group from Mariel was their youth, their maleness, and their blackness; although, it is important to keep in mind that their racial composition did not contrast as sharply with that of some of the pre-1959 migrants. [21] Another key difference between the Mariel migrants and their predecessors, of course, was that they were the first wave of Cuban migrants that grew from childhood to adulthood under Fidel Castro, whose government imprisoned about 20 percent of them.

---

[17] For a representative sample, see Richard R. Fagen, Richard A. Brody, and Thomas J. O'Leary, *Cubans in Exile: Disaffection and the Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968); Juan M. Clark, "The Exodus from Revolutionary Cuba (1959-1974): A Sociological Analysis" (PhD dissertation, University of Florida, 1975); Alejandro Portes et al., "Six Years Later, the Process of Incorporation of Cuban Exiles in the United States: 1973-1979," *Cuban Studies* 11, no. 2 (July 1981): 1–24; Lisandro Pérez, "Immigrant Economic Adjustment and Family Organization: The Cuban Success Story Reexamined," *International Migration Review* 20, no. 1 (1986): 4–20; García, *Havana USA*; Masud-Piloto, *From Welcomed Exiles to Illegal Immigrants*; Guillermo J. Grenier and Lisandro Pérez, *The Legacy of Exile: Cubans in the United States* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003); Silvia Pedraza, *Political Disaffection in Cuba's Revolution and Exodus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Alejandro Portes and Steven Shafer, "Revisiting the Enclave Hypothesis: Miami Twenty-Five Years Later," *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 25 (November 2007): 157–90.

[18] For a far from exhaustive but representative sample of such works, see Louis A. Pérez, "Cubans in Tampa: From Exiles to Immigrants, 1892-1901," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (1978): 129–40; Lisandro Pérez, "Cubans in the United States," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 487 (1986): 126–37; Heriberto Dixon, "The Cuban-American Counterpoint: Black Cubans in the United States," *Dialectical Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (1988): 227–39; Gerald E. Poyo, *With All, and for the Good of All: The Emergence of Popular Nationalism in the Cuban Communities of the United States, 1848-1898* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989); Duany, "Cuban Communities in the United States: Migration Waves, Settlement Patterns and Socioeconomic Diversity"; María de los Angeles Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors: Cuban Exile Politics in the United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Susan D. Greenbaum, *More than Black: Afro-Cubans in Tampa* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002); Yolanda Prieto, *The Cubans of Union City: Immigrants and Exiles in a New Jersey Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009); Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores, eds., *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

Understanding the work race did during the boatlift and in its aftermath must entail more than just documenting the experiences of black and *mulato* Cubans because, as Mirabal notes, they are not the only people "who have 'race.'"[22] Whiteness must be a subject of critique. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, people in the U.S. typically thought of Cubans as "Latins," a vague category used to describe migrants and descendants of migrants from an area that spanned most of the Western Hemisphere. Cubans, though, were seen as *white* Latins. Often their whiteness was "conditional," in that they were not perceived to be white in the way a person with ancestors from Great Britain was white, and they did not necessarily enjoy the benefits of "full" whiteness.[23] Yet the appearance of lighter-skinned Cubans afforded them opportunities to "pass," work toward, or buy in to whiteness that were denied to black and *mulato* Cubans.[24] Race thus underpinned the "Cuban success story," but rarely was race invoked explicitly—at least in public forums—in its construction and reproduction. By focusing on the experiences of black and *mulato* Cubans, this thesis highlights the extent to which narratives of Cuban migration history have relied on a selective silencing of race. The "success story" was predicated on an unspoken presumption of Cuban whiteness. At the same time, mentioning Mariel migrant blackness helped perpetuate dominant narratives about Cuban migrants by characterizing the newcomers as aberrations.[25]

---

[19] Mirabal, "'Ser de Aquí,'" 371.
[20] This is based on sociological data collected in the early 1980s, which is cited in García, *Havana USA*, 68. For a well-intentioned example of errant reporting, see Alyssa Garcia, "Situating Race, Navigating Belongings: Mapping Afro-Cuban Identities in the United States," *Latino(a) Research Review* 7, no. 1/2 (2008): 61.
[21] Poyo, *With All, and for the Good of All*; Greenbaum, *More than Black*.
[22] Mirabal, "'Ser de Aquí,'" 372.

The silencing of race in the "Cuban success story" has made it difficult to link the economic and political achievements that help sustain the myth to the benefits of their perceived whiteness in the United States. Likewise, the selective silencing of race in the story of Mariel has obscured the ways their perceived blackness relates to their criminalization and incarceration. On the one hand, the race of Mariel migrants has been used to emphasize their contrast with earlier waves of Cuban migration. On the other hand, most claims that the Mariel migrants were "undesirables" were divorced from explicit mentions of race. While scholars have noted the racial makeup of Mariel migrants and suggested it affected their treatment, they have not done enough to analyze what it meant for their experiences in the United States, particularly when it came to those who were locked up.

---

[23] For more regarding the concept of "conditional whiteness," see ibid., 373.

[24] Ibid., 377; For the argument that migrants become "white" over time and that this process is embedded in labor practices, see David R. Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

[25] I adopt the concept of "silencing race" from Ileana M. Rodríguez-Silva, *Silencing Race: Disentangling Blackness, Colonialism, and National Identities in Puerto Rico* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Her work is discussed in more detail below. Her work, and my argument, draws heavily on Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995), who suggests that history is constructed through a dialectic between "silences" and "mentions."

A LIBERAL RACIAL PROJECT

Although many factors contributed to the stigmatization of Mariel migrants, including gender and sexual orientation, the racial disparities among the people who were initially detained and the thousands more who were imprisoned over the course of the 1980s are particularly striking.[26] The present study centers on race because previous histories have not done so. The lack of attention to race may stem, in part, from the fact that white Floridians who opposed the entry of Mariel migrants denied that racism had anything to do with their concerns. Instead, they tended to couch their protests in terms of the Cubans' alleged criminal nature or fears that the new immigrants might diminish their home values if they came too close. As one South Florida resident put it to the *Palm Beach Post*, "I wish they would all drown out in the ocean. This is just a bunch of criminals coming over."[27] Though such condemnations of criminals were common, in the post-Jim Crow United States overt public racism was less widely accepted. The sparse instances of blatantly racist remarks complicate the task of locating race in the reaction to the Mariel boatlift. When protestors made explicit disclaimers that their concerns about the new immigrants had nothing to do with "race, color or creed," it is not easy to demonstrate convincingly that racism was at work.[28] Nor is it terribly difficult, once history is taken into account. It is in part for this reason that historical approaches—looking to context and antecedents—are invaluable to a critique of white supremacy in the "age of colorblindness."[29]

---

[26] For important recent work on gay Mariel migrants and U.S. policy, see Susana Peña, "'Obvious Gays' and the State Gaze: Cuban Gay Visibility and U.S. Immigration Policy during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. No. 3 (July 2007); Julio Capó, Jr., "Queering Mariel: Mediating Cold War Foreign Policy and U.S. Citizenship among Cuba's Homosexual Exile Community, 1978–1994," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 29, no. 4 (2010): 78.

[27] John Silva and Tom Dubocq, "State to Open 2 Missile Sites Here for Exiles," *Miami News*, May 6, 1980.

[28] John Silva, "Homeowners Block Plans for Miramar Refugee Stop," *Miami News*, May 7, 1980.

"Color-blindness," sometimes referred to as the "new racism," is a term now often employed by journalists and scholars to describe the paradigm of race and racism that became dominant in the U.S. after the sixties.[30] This theory maintains that a new racial ideology emerged in response to the anti-racist movements of the 1960s and was predicated on denying the relevance of race, even as race continued to structure social relations. This led to an insidious form of racism that is difficult to trace and name. The notion of color-blindness has parallels in the Caribbean often overlooked by historians of the United States, even though these systems of thought have been the subject of critique for some time. As historians of Cuba have demonstrated, the process of nation formation on the island contributed to an official discourse of race that resembled, in some ways, what scholars of the post-sixties U.S. call color-blindness.[31] Ileana Rodríguez-Silva is a recent critic of the racialized system of thought in Puerto Rico, which she argues has produced an ongoing dynamic of "silencing race" in order to sustain a liberal social order. Rodríguez-Silva contends that a pattern of partial silences has been contested and enforced over time in Puerto Rico to construct racial differences in the midst of struggles for power.[32] Since some scholars now see U.S. invasions and occupations in Cuba and Puerto Rico as having been instrumental to the development of each nation's official racial paradigm—sometimes referred to as the "myth of racial democracy" by scholars of Cuba—there is some irony in the proposition that a version of these models may have risen to dominance in the United States.

---

[29] I adopt this phrase from Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

[30] For early versions of this theory, see Robert Charles Smith, *Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Now You See It, Now You Don't* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Boulder, CO: L. Rienner, 2001). For a more recent discussion, see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

[31] See, for example, Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

[32] Rodríguez-Silva, *Silencing Race*, 15–17.

The term color-blindness does not imply that racialized perceptions or attitudes have disappeared in the United States. Rather, it is a useful framework for understanding a shift in the discursive parameters of white supremacy, particularly when it comes to the political arena. A number of scholars have argued that politicians began using racially coded language about "crime" in place of explicit racial language after the victories of civil rights movements in the sixties. The notion that disaffected working-class white voters, especially in the South, responded to 1960s racial justice movements by electing conservatives who promised to crack down on crime is a prominent thread within the "backlash theory," a common explanation for the breakdown of postwar liberalism. Thomas and Mary Edsall, who published *Chain Reaction* in 1991, are probably most responsible for the popularization of this concept. In their telling, a conservative movement took advantage of feelings of neglect among working-class whites to achieve political primacy. Along with tax cuts for the wealthy and attacks on social programs there emerged increasingly punitive laws and growing prison populations.[33] This interpretation contributed to a narrative of the rise of a U.S. "carceral state" that linked it firmly to the New Right and, specifically, to the "Southern strategy" and the War on Drugs initiated by Richard Nixon and escalated by Ronald Reagan.

Some scholars and the vast majority of journalists continue to emphasize links between prison growth and conservative Republicans. Recently, though, political scientists and historians have begun to show that theories of the carceral state with a narrow focus on the post-sixties conservative ascendancy emanating from the South or the Sunbelt risk missing key facets of the history of mass incarceration. In particular, such interpretations ignore the instrumental roles played by Democrats and liberal grassroots organizations in this process, including the ways race shaped their attitudes and actions. Marie Gottschalk has shown that national victims' rights groups helped push through increasingly punitive legislation. Naomi Murakawa has found that liberal administrations as far back as Harry Truman laid the groundwork for mass incarceration. And Elizabeth Hinton has demonstrated that the criminal justice policies within Lyndon Johnson's simultaneous War on Poverty and War on Crime intensified the criminalization and policing of black communities in the U.S. and helped pave the way for the eventual construction of a massive prison infrastructure.[34]

---

[33] Thomas B. Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1991), esp. 16–17, 110–115.

The rise of migrant detention likewise has been attributed to conservative politicians.[35] There is good reason for this—Reagan Reagan did oversee the rapid expansion of immigrant detention in the 1980s—and some of the most recent scholarship on the Mariel boatlift assigns Reagan blame for the indefinite detention of thousands of Cubans who entered the U.S. that year.[36] Yet it was the administration of a Democrat known for his emphasis on international human rights, Jimmy Carter, which developed the detention centers that held Mariel migrants. It was a commission created under Carter's watch that first recommended increasing the funding available for migrant detention in order to deter possible future migrants. It was Democrat Bill

---

[34] Marie Gottschalk, *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Elizabeth Hinton, "'A War within Our Own Boundaries': Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the Rise of the Carceral State," *Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (June 2015): 100–112.

[35] Robert S. Kahn, *Other People's Blood: U.S. Immigration Prisons in the Reagan Decade* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996).

[36] Kristina Shull, "'Nobody Wants These People': Reagan's Immigration Crisis and the Containment of Foreign Bodies," in *Body and Nation: The Global Realm of U.S. Body Politics in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Emily S. Rosenberg and Shanon Fitzpatrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

Clinton, then the governor of Arkansas, who pushed for heightened security and increasingly punitive procedures at the detention center used to confine the largest number of Cubans from Mariel. As with the incarceration of people born in the United States, liberals have had a major hand in the growth of migrant detention.

The racialized impact of ostensibly color-blind policies and the 'not racist' actions of individuals can best be understood as a "racial project," a concept advanced by sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant. Omi and Winant define a racial project as "*simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines*."[37] This thesis will illustrate how the attitudes and actions of governments, organizations, and individuals in the U.S. contributed to a racial project that assigned meanings, distributed resources, and—to add one more dimension to the original definition—organized space along racial lines. This outcome was not a product of some nebulous racist conspiracy. The forms of power that gained energy and converged in the crisis moment of the Mariel boatlift stemmed from an array of racialized and racializing forces in both Cuba and the U.S., including media representations, punitive policies and systems, existing structures of wealth, and historical patterns of migration. The experiences of black and *mulato* Cubans from Mariel were often shaped by mundane factors that played out on a human scale.

MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Existing scholarship on the history of migration and policies of exclusion, detention, and deportation provides an important framework for dissecting the social tissue connecting migration, race, and criminality.[38] Several studies have developed sophisticated critiques of the construction of migrants as "illegal" or "criminal," and a number of these works have engaged directly with theories of racial formation.[39] One of the indispensable contributions of this work has been to reveal the frailty of the concept of "ethnicity" when it comes to describing the experiences of migrants in the United States. David Roediger makes a particularly compelling argument that race, not ethnicity, was the construct used historically to refer to most new migrants in the United States, including many people whose descendants are now constructed as white.[40] While drawing on this foundation, this thesis will use the history of the Mariel boatlift to stretch the historiography of migration in the United States. Because of the racial disparities that emerged among detained Mariel migrants, their stories pose important questions for previous studies of migrant detention, which have tended to deal largely in undifferentiated national groups.

---

[37] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 125 (emphasis in original).

Historian Carl J. Bon Tempo has drawn on some of the recent work on migration to make important contributions to the study of Cold War refugees, but he asserts that the particular circumstances of refugees and distinct trends in refugee policy demand individual attention and must not be "subsumed under the immigration story."[41] Many Cubans in the United States would agree, and there are some good reasons to distinguish their history from that of other migrants, including the events that led to their exile or migration and the unprecedented institutional and financial support they received via the Cuban Refugee Program and the Cuban Adjustment Act. The problem with Bon Tempo's argument is that there is no one "immigration story," and any good history of migration takes particularities into account. Drawing a thick line to separate "migrants" and "refugees" has the potential to obscure more than it reveals. Bon Tempo argues that "refugees are chased out of their countries while immigrants choose to leave theirs."[42] While some people have fled their homes in order to save their lives and others have left under circumstances that were far less dire, determining who has made a "choice" is not as simple as Bon Tempo suggests. Migration and the ensuing experiences are conditioned by a dizzying array of factors that cannot be encapsulated to make sharp distinctions between "political refugees" and "economic migrants." Using legal structures to determine who is included and who is excluded in such categories is inevitably fraught with problems, which was revealed by the disparate treatment of Haitian and Cuban migrants throughout the 1970s and during the first days of the Mariel boatlift. This thesis does not attempt to draw these sorts of distinctions. However, the uncritical use of the categories "refugee" and "exile" have helped perpetuate the notion that Cubans are exceptional among migrants in the United States. Moreover, the refugee framework, like the exile model, seems to have insulated Cubans in the U.S. from crucial questions about race that have characterized studies of some other migrants. For these reasons, this thesis typically employs the more neutral (though imperfect) term "migrant" to describe people who have left one nation and entered another, including most of the Cubans who entered the U.S. during the Mariel boatlift. The terms “exile” and “refugee” are used to describe individuals and communities that have identified themselves in one of these ways or, in the latter case, to refer to a legal category.

---

[38] Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Daniel J. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006); Robert E. Koulish, *Immigration and American Democracy: Subverting the Rule of Law* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Deirdre M. Moloney, *National Insecurities: Immigrants and U.S. Deportation Policy since 1882* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Aviva Chomsky, *Undocumented: How Immigration Became Illegal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).

[39] Ian Haney-López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*, Rev. ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

[40] Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White*.

---

[41] Carl J. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 3. For an example of strong scholarship on Mariel Cubans within this framework, see Lipman, "A Refugee Camp in America."

[42] Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 2.

NAMING AND TRANSLATING RACE

Nothing demonstrates that race is a social construct quite like migration. When people move across space, new racial meanings are assigned to them, and sometimes they adopt new racial meanings for themselves. Many of the Mariel migrants became aware of the instability of race very quickly after entering the United States. Cubans who saw themselves as “*mulato*” were likely to be seen as “black” or “African American” in the United States. Cubans who identified as “white” in Cuba were likely to be seen as “Latins” or “Hispanics” after they crossed the Straits of Florida. The idea that a person could be both “black” and “Latin” was a hard concept for many people in the U.S. to comprehend in 1980. The instability and complexity of race is particularly apparent when attempts are made to find ways to name racial categories for the sake of census data and surveys. A Pew Research Center study conducted in 2014 found that 24 percent of “U.S. Hispanics” identified as “Afro-Latinos.” However, only 18 percent of those “Afro-Latinos” identified as “black.” About one quarter reported their race simply as “Hispanic,” 9 percent identified as “mixed race,” and a striking *38 percent* of people who called themselves “Afro-Latinos” identified their race as “white.”[43] Taking such evidence into account, this thesis rests on the idea that race is an unstable construct and an element of identity formation that is conditioned by material, historical, geographical, social, and individual factors. Race is simultaneously embodied, constructed, and performed.[44] Although race is, in a sense, a fiction, its profound role in the lives of individuals and societies necessitates finding ways to write about it. Within this study, phrases like "U.S.-born white people" are used to describe people typically considered "white" in the United States in 1980; phrases like "U.S.-born black people" describe people from the U.S. typically viewed as "black" or "African American;" the phrase "white Cubans" describes people on the island or in the U.S. with lighter skin; and the term "black and *mulato* Cubans" represents people on the island or in the U.S. with darker skin.

---

[43] Gustavo López and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, “Afro-Latino: A Deeply Rooted Identity among U.S. Hispanics,” *Pew Research Center*, March 1, 2016, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/01/afro-latino-a-deeply-rooted-identity-among-u-s-hispanics/.

The present study is not meant to offer a full accounting of racial formation among Cuban migrants. Rather, its purpose is to identify racial projects that affected detained Cubans from Mariel and to demonstrate *how* the interplay among various racialized forms of power shaped their lives. That being said, achieving this purpose requires paying attention to the process of racial translation that occurred as people moved. Lorgia García-Peña refers to this as a *"vaivén,"* a coming and going of racial constructs linked to the movement of people across ideologies, economies, and borders.[45] Blackness, García-Peña insists, is *translated* when people move from one space into another. Whiteness also requires translations. Drawing on Garcia-Peña's insights about the historical contingency of race-in-motion, this thesis follows black and *mulato* Cubans through carceral spaces variously designed to shelter, assimilate, isolate, and punish them. Their position among racial constructs shifted with their movement from Cuba to the United States, and their eventual placement in the U.S. was supposed to be facilitated by a period of immobility in detention centers. But for many black and *mulato* Mariel migrants, their ‘place’ remained surrounded by chain-link fences.

---

[44] The argument that race is a social construct has a long history in the discipline of sociology. In the late 1980s, Michael Omi and Howard Winant produced one of the more comprehensive and influential analyses of the construction of race in Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*. Performance theories of race, drawing heavily on Judith Butler's work on gender, were developed later. Within the field of Latina/o studies, Jonathan Xavier Inda has helped pioneer this theory. For an early example, see his "Performativity, Materiality, and the Racial Body," *Latino Studies Journal* 11, no. 3 (2000): 74–99.

[45] Lorgia García-Peña, "Translating Blackness: Dominicans Negotiating Race and Belonging," *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* 45, no. 2 (2015): 11. García-Peña draws on the work of Jorge Duany in her use of the concept of *vaivén*.

CHAPTER 2

"JUST A BUNCH OF CRIMINALS"

Ramón arrived in the United States on a boat from Mariel, Cuba, in the early summer of 1980. He was in his mid-fifties. He was *mulato*, a racial category Cubans use that does not have a precise translation, but many people in the U.S. would have called him "black," or "light-skinned," or maybe "mixed." Shortly after his arrival in south Florida, like about 19,000 other Cubans who were part of what became known as the Mariel boatlift, Ramón was put on a plane and sent to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. The military base there had been used to detain German prisoners of war during World War II and in 1975 it held refugees from Vietnam. In 1980, it was a detention center for Cubans from Mariel. Ramón's best hope for getting out was a brother he had in south Florida. But when a Red Cross employee called his brother to ask if he would be willing to sponsor Ramón's release, he refused. He explained that he lived in Coral Gables, a white and wealthy enclave in Miami. He emphasized that Ramón was actually his *half*-brother and, unlike him, Ramón was "black." He did not want to cause any trouble in the neighborhood, so he asked the aid worker to tell Ramón that he had never picked up the phone.[1]

This is not a story that has been told in the many scholarly and journalistic accounts of the Mariel boatlift. Much of the early press coverage was centered on the fear that Fidel Castro was sending violent "criminals" to the United States.[2] Such reports inspired the 1983 film *Scarface*, the second film adaptation of a 1929 novel based on the life of Al Capone. Sociologists soon began to contest the fearful and reactionary response to the boatlift by demonstrating that it was exaggerated. They suggested it reflected a phenomenon that some later called the "Scarface Legacy."[3] Federal agents did identify several hundred "hardened criminals" among the Mariel migrants, but officials and most scholars ultimately concluded that, although about 20 percent of the incoming Cubans had spent some time in prison, less than 1 percent had committed acts of violence or other felonies deemed serious.[4] The vast majority of the formerly incarcerated migrants had been arrested and imprisoned for minor offenses or for acts that would not have been illegal in the United States. Petty theft from state-owned stores or warehouses could result in lengthy prison terms, and Cuban laws made alcoholism, vagrancy, and homosexuality potentially serious crimes. In some instances, they were detained by Cuban police on the mere suspicion that they were likely to break the law at some point in the future.[5] Recent work suggests that Mariel migrants were blamed unfairly for the early-eighties rise in the Miami murder rate, as well.[6]

---

[1] Eduardo Gamarra, interview with the author, November 2, 2015. Gamarra worked for the Red Cross refugee relocation service at the detention center in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, and at the El Centro immigrant detention center in southern California. He conducted interviews with detainees and helped connect them with sponsors.

Despite such evidence, the myth of *marielito* criminality persists. Whereas much of the existing scholarship questions the empirical basis for this perception, the aim of this chapter is to explain the development of the myth and assess its impacts. Ramón's experience is essential to this project because, unlike most studies of Mariel, his story affirms the central importance of race in the history of the boatlift. Ramón had spent time in a Cuban prison, but his half-brother was more concerned about his skin tone than his rap sheet. Race mattered, and Mariel was the first time since the 1959 revolution that a large number of black and *mulato* Cubans entered the U.S., accounting for up to 40 percent of the boatlift. Some scholars have suggested that racism contributed to the stigmatization of the new migrants but none have explored this question fully.[7] In fact, historians have dedicated relatively little attention to the the detention centers where over 80 percent of the black and *mulato* Mariel migrants were sent after arriving. In addition to Fort Chaffee, the Carter administration opened detention centers at Fort Eglin, Florida; Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania; and Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. Black and *mulato* Cubans were about 2.4 times more likely than white Cubans to be detained at these sites.[8]

---

[2] Martin Schram and Charles R. Babcock, "President Moves to Halt Illegal Cuban Boatlift," *Washington Post*, May 15, 1980.

[3] B. E. Aguirre, Rogelio Sáenz, and Brian Sinclair James, "Marielitos Ten Years Later: The Scarface Legacy," *Social Science Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (1997): 487–507.

[4] "Overview: Resettlement Camps, Chapter 2" (draft), September 25, 1981, Folder 1 "Barbara Lawson: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Documents, 1980-1981," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami, Miami, FL. (Hereafter CHC); White House Press Office, "Cuban and Haitian Arrivals: Crisis and Response," June 30, 1980, Folder "Read 2 [1]," Box 16, RG 220 Records of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, GA. (Hereafter CHTF).

[5] García, *Havana USA*, 64. "Overview: Resettlement Camps, Chapter 2" (draft), September 25, 1981, Folder 1 "Barbara Lawson: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Documents, 1980-1981," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[6] Ramiro Martinez Jr., Amie L. Nielsen, and Matthew T. Lee, "Reconsidering the Marielito Legacy: Race/Ethnicity, Nativity, and Homicide Motives," *Social Science Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2003): 397–411.

Although existing studies demonstrate the shaky empirical basis for the criminal reputation of the incoming Cubans, and journalists have documented the racial disparities that emerged in detention centers, previous work insufficiently connects these observations. This chapter focuses on race and the interplay among media representations, public perceptions, state institutions, and policy decisions to open up new avenues for understanding the criminalization of Mariel migrants and its racially disproportionate effects. The color-blind nature of the official conversation surrounding the Mariel boatlift may have limited past investigations into the role played by race. Press coverage of the boatlift on both sides of the Straits of Florida muted talk of race. Contemporary U.S. immigration laws made no mention of race, and neither Cuba nor the

---

[7] Pedraza, "Los Marielitos of 1980: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality"; Gastón A. Fernández, "Race, Gender, and Class in the Persistence of the Mariel Stigma Twenty Years after the Exodus from Cuba," *International Migration Review* 41, no. 3 (2007): 602–22.

[8] These numbers are calculated from the figures presented in Bach, Bach, and Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants,'" 33.

United States had race written into their penal codes. Although punitive attitudes and practices linking race to criminality in Cuba and the U.S. did not make the racialized consequences of the boatlift inevitable, such ideas and actions made racially disproportionate results possible. By examining moments in which purportedly color-blind discourses and race-neutral policies encountered structures, prejudices, and pragmatism on the ground—as they did when Ramón's brother refused to take him in—explanations for the racially disparate impact of these forces come into clearer view.

Forming Racial Suspects through Race-Neutral Language

If a single event can be said to have precipitated the Mariel migration crisis, it occurred on April 1, 1980, when a Cuban man named Hector Sanyustiz rammed a minibus with five passengers through the gates of the Peruvian embassy in Havana. They sought asylum and permission to leave the country. The Cuban government demanded that the Peruvians give up the gatecrashers because a guard had died in the volley of bullets intended to stop them. When Peru refused, Fidel Castro ordered the removal of barriers surrounding the embassy, and some 10,000 people flooded the grounds. Castro quickly went on the offensive, lambasting the would-be emigrants and orchestrating public "acts of repudiation" designed to discredit and sometimes physically abuse Cubans who sought to leave the island. In the meantime, Cuba and Peru negotiated a deal to fly the Cubans from the embassy to Costa Rica, at which point they would be transferred to several other countries. About 7,500 Cubans left the island this way. Then Castro shut down the airlift. He had a new proposal. As he had done in 1965, he decided to open one of the country's ports so that anyone wishing to leave could do so. The port of departure in 1980 was Mariel, a town about 20 miles west of Havana. Cubans in the U.S. arranged for thousands of vessels to pick up their relatives and friends, and tens of thousands of Cubans on the island started making their way to Mariel.[9]

Castro devoted his annual May Day speech that year to the project of discrediting the emigrants. The most famous word he used was "*escoria*" (scum), and a few times he mentioned "*delincuentes*" (criminals). Most of his insults, however, were specifically socialist. Castro referred to the Mariel migrants as "*lumpen*" 25 times in his speech, comparing them to Karl Marx's *lumpenproletariat*. Marx used this term to refer to a segment of the working class that included con artists, sex workers, pickpockets, the jobless, and the homeless.[10] Castro understood the Marxian meaning of *lumpen*, and he used it to suggest that the people who wished to leave Cuba were not capable of achieving the level of class consciousness necessary to sustain the ongoing struggle for socialism on the island. Unlike the crowd that cheered him on that day and punctuated his speech with the refrain, "*¡Que se vayan!"* (Good riddance!), the Mariel migrants lacked "revolutionary blood."[11] Castro certainly sought to impugn the integrity of people who wanted to leave Cuba, but it is significant that he drew his attacks along ideological lines. The editors of *Granma*, the print organ of the Cuban Communist Party, similarly cast doubt on the socialist credentials of the people leaving from Mariel by labeling them "*antisociales*." The direct English translation of this term failed to capture its politicized meaning in Cuba. In the United States, it remains difficult to separate "antisocial" from its pathological connotation. In fact, migrants thought to have "antisocial personality disorder" were potentially ineligible for admission to the U.S. under federal immigration laws, which excluded from entry people who were diagnosed with various forms of mental illness.[12]

---

[9] García, *Havana USA*, 56–60.

[10] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. Daniel De Leon (Chicago : Kerr & Co., 1907), 41. In this version, the translator uses the term "slum-proletariat."

[11] Fidel Castro Ruz, "Discurso Pronunciado Por El Comandante En Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz" (speech), May 1, 1980, Havana, Cuba, *Discursos e intervenciones del Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro Ruz, Presidente del Consejo de Estado de la República de Cuba*, http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1980/esp/f010580e.html (accessed November 22, 2015). Translations are the author's.

In contrast with news accounts in Cuba, initial U.S. press coverage of the mass migration was generally positive and showcased stories of family members reunited by the "Freedom Flotilla." For roughly thirty years, the U.S. had celebrated people who came to its gates from communist nations as small victories in the Cold War. Six days after the first boat arrived from Mariel, syndicated columnist George Will proclaimed that the Cubans migrants were "a resource more precious than all the oil under Saudi Arabia."[13] A week and half into the Mariel boatlift, however, sympathetic accounts began to give way to fearful reports of ragged strangers making their way onto boats sent for the relatives of Miami Cubans. Castro denied allegations that he was deporting dangerous felons, but INS agents told reporters they had found murderers and other criminals among the new arrivals.[14] Such statements fed escalating claims that the Cuban government was "emptying" its prisons and asylums, forcing convicts and mental patients onto boats, and "sending the undesirables of Cuban society to the United States."[15] Sociologists Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick found that the "[*Miami*] *Herald* repeatedly castigated Cuban-Americans for their eagerness to rescue relatives left in Cuba and shrilly echoed Castro's characterization of new refugees" as "undesirables." Portes and Stepick determined that negative references to the new immigrants made up 90 percent of the paper's coverage by the last week of May and then hovered consistently between 40 and 60 percent.[16]

---

[12] *An Act to amend the Immigration and Nationality Act, and for other purposes*, Public Law 89-236, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 79 (1965): 911-922.

[13] George F. Will, "A Nation of Emigrants," *Washington Post*, April 27, 1980.

[14] Heather Dewar, "Thunderstorm Heads for Straights, 250 Boats Urged to Make for Port," *Miami News*, May 2, 1980.

[15] Schram and Babcock, "President Moves to Halt Illegal Cuban Boatlift."

[16] Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick, *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 23, 27.

National news media reflected much of the Miami press coverage at the time. A study of two of the nation's most widely circulated newspapers, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post*, found that after about ten days of mostly positive or neutral coverage regarding the Mariel migrants, negative references to the immigrants became the norm. Among references to various forms of "deviance," including homosexuality and mental illness, it was the Cubans' alleged criminality that was mentioned most often. After the first week of the boatlift, positive and neutral terms, such as "refugee," appeared far less often than terms like "criminal" and "criminally insane."[17] The words that journalists chose, particularly when translating Spanish-language reports from Cuba, shaped representations of the new arrivals in fundamental ways. Cuban news stories about "*antisociales"* leaving the island were voided of their political content in translated accounts of incoming "antisocial elements."[18] In translation, Fidel Castro's *"lumpen*" and *"escoria*" became "undesirables" and often appeared alongside "criminals" in U.S. news stories. Bureaucrats adopted similar language, and "undesirables" infiltrated government records and press releases.[19]

Even in Miami's Spanish-language media, representations of Mariel migrants were distinct from those produced in Cuba. Shortly after arriving in Key West in late April, Felix Juster Gonzalez went on the air with WQBA, a popular Spanish-language radio station, to share his migration story. He admitted to having a criminal record in Cuba. He explained that he had been on parole in Havana when Cuban officials threatened him with death if he did not leave for the United States. Gonzalez claimed he was forced to lie to U.S. officials and tell them he had been at the Peruvian embassy with other asylum seekers. He suggested that roughly 1,000 prisoners in Cuba followed a similar path to the United States.[20] Such stories contributed to the notion among established Miami Cubans that the new migrants were "Castro's animals," products of a corrupt communist system that produced delinquency.[21] Although they inverted Fidel Castro's logic, they reached a similar conclusion—beyond their family members, friends, and obvious political dissidents, the people leaving from Mariel were worth very little to them.

---

[17] Brian Hufker and Gray Cavender, "From Freedom Flotilla to America's Burden: The Social Construction of the Mariel Immigrants," *Sociological Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (June 1990): 323–324.

[18] Ralph Renick, "Cuban Refugee Crisis Editorials," WTVJ news (Miami, FL), 1980, 80100 NWT 1 of 1, Peabody Awards Collection, Walter J. Brown Media Archives & Peabody Awards Collection, University of Georgia, Athens, GA.

[19] White House Press Office, "Cuban and Haitian Arrivals: Crisis and Response," June 30, 1980, Folder "Read 2 [1]," Box 16, CHTF.

Explicit discussions of race were absent from most Cuban state press accounts dedicated to disparaging the people leaving the island. However, Cuban media outlets readily described the race of the Mariel migrants when it could be used to reinforce government claims that the United States was plagued by persistent racism. Historian Alejandro de la Fuente found that *Granma* reported on a Ku Klux Klan protest at Fort Eglin in the Florida Panhandle and *Bohemia* magazine published a photograph of a black Mariel migrant handcuffed by U.S. law enforcement officers. The Cuban government evinced a sort of cognitive dissonance in its portrayals of the tens of thousands of people leaving for Florida. When Fidel Castro described Mariel migrants as "scum" and "*lumpen*," he made no mention of their race. When the state press sought to contrast the purported racial democracy of Cuba with the alleged "racial hell" of Miami, reporters and photographers made clear that a significant number of the people leaving from Mariel were black and *mulato*.[22]

Broader discourses of race, crime, and geography further contributed to the production of racialized meanings in ostensibly race-neutral Cuban reporting about the Mariel boatlift. Imagined links between blackness and criminality, which were forged in early-twentieth century

---

[20] Heather Dewar and Ana Veciana, "New Fleet Heads for Cuba," *Miami News*, April 29, 1980.
[21] Gamarra, interview with the author.
[22] Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 305.

Cuban social science, persisted into the 1980s.[23] De la Fuente has noted that the Policía Nacional Revolucionaria (National Revolutionary Police) designated certain areas of Havana as *"focos delictivos*" (criminal centers). A disproportionate percentage of these spaces were in Habana Vieja, Centro Habana, and Marianao—the three areas with the highest concentrations of black and *mulato* residents. In 1987, the Cuban attorney general's office found that the vast majority of the *focos delictivos* in those neighborhoods did not have above average crime rates.[24]

Such racialized geographies existed across the island and affected perceptions of *orientales*, people from Cuba's easternmost province. As migrants moved west from Oriente to Havana in search of work, they faced resentment and stigmatization. The notion that *orientales* were prone to theft and other criminal acts was common in Havana and even appeared in Fidel Castro's speeches.[25] Oriente had a higher concentration of black and *mulato* Cubans than the western end of the island, and implicit in references to *orientales* in western Cuba was the suggestion that they were people with dark skin. In some instances, the perceived blackness of "Eastern delinquents" was made explicit. As one white Cuban in Havana saw it, black *orientales* were quick to "resort to robbery" to solve their problems.[26] The effects of criminalizing *orientales* became apparent in the aftermath of the Mariel boatlift. The fourth large detention center the U.S. government opened in response to the migration crisis was at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. Of the four sites, Fort McCoy had the largest proportion of Cubans from Oriente; it was also the site with the highest initial concentration of formerly incarcerated people.[27]

---

[23] Alejandra Bronfman, *Measures of Equality: Social Science, Citizenship, and Race in Cuba, 1902-1940*, Envisioning Cuba (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
[24] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 313–314.
[25] Ibid., 328.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Bach, Bach, and Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants,'" 38, 45.

Like their Cuban counterparts, U.S. journalists rarely mentioned race in their stories about the Mariel boatlift. But pictures were likely worth more than journalists' ostensibly race-neutral words. At the point when "criminals" and "undesirables" became fixtures in press accounts, the images of incoming Cubans began to shift. Until May 1, almost all photographs in the *Miami News* accompanied stories of family reunifications. The centerpiece on the front page that day showed a mother embracing her child who had been separated from her at an immigrant processing center. Both the mother and the daughter had very light skin compared to the men who appeared in a photograph on another page in the same issue. This was one of the first images of black and *mulato* Mariel migrants published in the paper during the boatlift, and it ran next to an article in which Victor Palmieri, Carter's Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, discussed the need to weed out criminals from the other arrivals.[28] In the photograph, a boatload of men—many of whom have dark skin—stand ready to disembark in Key West. Some passengers stand at the edge of the boat, gripping a rope, almost as if they are preparing to jump onto the dock. It looks more like an invasion than a reunion, and these sorts of images became increasingly common over the course of the summer.

Even in the absence of images, perceptions of the Mariel migrants were influenced by the long history of associating criminality and blackness in the United States. Although early-twentieth century U.S. criminology followed a distinct trajectory from that of its Cuban counterpart, the U.S. tradition also grew out of white supremacist ideologies and biological theories of race.[29] Crime reporting contributed further to the discursive relationship between criminality and blackness. Media critic Carol A. Stabile insists, "No other ethnic or racial group has been singled out for the wholesale criminalization to which African Americans have been subjected during the last four decades of the twentieth century."[30] Of course, black and *mulato* Cubans did not fit neatly into categories established for black people born in the United States, and Miami had long been home to black migrants from the Caribbean who differentiated themselves from U.S.-born blacks to improve their positions within the local social order.[31] Still, given historical trends in U.S. social science and crime reporting, the physical appearance of black and *mulato* Cubans would have reinforced widespread representations of Mariel migrants as criminals.

---

[28] Morton Lucoff, "U.S. To Begin in Processing Refugees," *Miami News*, May 1, 1980.

[29] Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

During the summer of 1980 and throughout the next several years, reports of rapidly rising murder rates in Miami garnered national attention. The city was becoming a major port of entry for cocaine produced in South America and a hub for international drug trafficking. The Mariel boatlift occurred as the effects of this trend were becoming clear to people in south Florida, and the arrival of the new migrants coincided with rapidly rising crime rates in the Miami area. Law enforcement officials began attributing this pattern to the influx of Cubans, which triggered a barrage of news stories on the subject. These reports serve to underline the ways in which alarmist accounts fed fears that eventually dominated public perceptions of the Mariel migrants. As will be shown, the powerful interaction between Cuban and U.S. news media had concrete effects—namely the detention of a disproportionate number of black and *mulato* Cubans. As Stabile puts it, "Representations of crime and criminals may be representations, but these have all too real material consequences."[32] Such consequences are evident in the results of policy decisions that the Carter administration made that summer, which simultaneously drew on media representations and helped to produce them.

---

[30] Carol A. Stabile, *White Victims, Black Villains: Gender, Race and Crime News in US Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 8.

[31] For a discussion of these constructs, as well as an excellent example of their instability, see N. D. B. Connolly, "Timely Innovations: Planes, Trains and the 'Whites Only' Economy of a Pan-American City," *Urban History* 36, no. 2 (August 2009): 258–259.

[32] Stabile, *White Victims, Black Villains*, 2.

Reinscribing the Racial Contours of Refugee Policy

It was common during the Mariel boatlift to hear people suggest that Fidel Castro had 'put one over' on Jimmy Carter by sending the "undesirables" of Cuban society across the Straits of Florida. Ralph Renick, the most influential television news anchor in Miami, opined that the "clever bearded one" was "having the last laugh," explaining that Castro had sent his "problem people—killers, thieves, and others who have been in prison who are noncontributors and troublemakers."[33] Initial celebrations of the Mariel exodus as an indictment of Cuban socialism gave way to the common view that the influx was a disaster emblematic of Jimmy Carter's ineptitude. The Cuban state press reinforced this image of the U.S. president through editorials and cartoons, including one that depicted the migrants as a "scum cake" being served to him. The cartoonist presented Carter with an unenviable choice: accept the dregs of Cuban society or betray his oft-stated commitment to humanitarianism.[34] The artist captured a central dilemma for the U.S. government, one which was articulated in several news articles at the beginning of the boatlift but which has received minimal attention in subsequent studies.[35] The genius of Fidel Castro's actions was not his decision to send people from prisons and asylums to Miami. Rather, the inspired element of his choice to open up Mariel stemmed from his understanding of the contradictions inherent in U.S. immigration and refugee policy. As a number of historians have demonstrated for other groups of migrants, the inconsistencies in these policies frequently turned on race.[36]

---

[33] Renick, "Cuban Refugee Crisis Editorials."

[34] Abel Sierra Madero, "¡Que Se Vayan! Actos de Repudio, Nacionalismo Y Sexualidad En Cuba Durante El Éxodo Del Mariel," (paper presented at the Florida International University symposium, *The Mariel Exodus, 35 Years Later: Impacts in the U.S. and Cuba*, Miami, FL, October 2015).

[35] John M. Goshko, "State Dept. Seeks to Halt Sealift," *Washington Post*, April 24, 1980.

On April 22, a day after the first Cubans arrived in Key West from Mariel, *Granma* published an editorial arguing that Haitians, who had been arriving on Florida's shores in large numbers for years, were "the true measure of Carter's human rights policy. They live under a repressive regime…but they are not admitted as political refugees while the United States stimulates the emigration of delinquents from Cuba."[37] Just a few days prior, civil rights activist Jesse Jackson had led a protest in Miami against what many perceived as a racist double standard in the treatment of Cuban and Haitian migrants.[38] Since 1972, Haitians fleeing the regime of Jean-Claude Duvalier had been sailing to Florida. Nearly 16,000 Haitians entered South Florida in a relatively short period prior to and during the Mariel boatlift.[39] Unlike Cubans, who were regarded as "political refugees" in the eyes of the U.S. government, Haitians were considered "economic refugees." In contrast with its approach to Cubans, the INS routinely detained and deported Haitians.[40] The first Cubans to arrive from Mariel were quickly released to their families; Haitians who arrived during the same period were detained by the INS and put in prison pending deportation proceedings.[41] Haitian community organizations in Florida and the Congressional Black Caucus advocated for asylum for Haitians throughout the 1970s, arguing that Haitians were not afforded the protections and benefits granted to Cubans because they were black and because Duvalier, though brutal, was not a communist. The arrival of tens of thousands of Cubans from Mariel triggered a new round of protests regarding the lack of consistency in refugee policy.[42]

---

[36] Gerstle, *American Crucible*; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*.
[37] Quoted in Marlise Simons, "Cuba Approves Refugees' Departure In Florida-Chartered Flotilla of Boats," *Washington Post*, April 22, 1980.
[38] Combined Miami News Services, "Black Leader Urges Asylum at Miami Rally," *Miami News*, April 21, 1980.
[39] White House Press Office, "Cuban and Haitian Arrivals: Crisis and Response," June 30, 1980, Folder "Read 2 [1]," Box 16, CHTF.
[40] "Memorandum of Agreement Between the Bureau of Prisons and the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the U.S. Public Health Service," March 3, 1980, Folder "Haitians," Box 4, CHTF.
[41] Jack Knarr, "New Groups of Haitians Arrive at Miami, Dania," *Miami News*, April 23, 1980.

Some of the confusion stemmed from the fact that Congress had recently overhauled the policy in question by passing the Refugee Act of 1980, which took effect just weeks before the start of the Mariel boatlift. The federal government had been operating various ad hoc refugee programs in response to crises as they emerged. The U.S. typically admitted refugees through the parole authority vested in the Attorney General and provided services by appropriating funds and assigning duties through a combination of executive orders and piecemeal legislation. The Cuban Refugee Program in 1961 and Indochinese Migration and Refugee Assistance Act in 1975 were two such programs. In 1979, Carter's newly appointed Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, Dick Clark, addressed a subcommittee of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and emphasized that the Refugee Act was a "comprehensive long-term policy on the admission and resettlement of refugees" and a way to fulfill "commitments to the world community" at a time when the U.S. was asking other nations to "do more" to respond to the growing number of displaced people. The United States was under pressure, moreover, to formalize a definition of "refugee."[43] Prior to 1980, the U.S. prioritized people who came to its shores from communist nations. Asylum seekers who fled the persecution of governments more amenable to U.S. interests, including Duvalier's regime in Haiti, often faced denial or deportation. The Refugee Act stipulated that the only people eligible for refugee status and its attendant benefits were those who could not or would not return to their nation of origin because of "persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion."[44] Just when the U.S. stopped automatically classifying Cubans as refugees, thousands of them began arriving in Key West.

---

[42] Robert Pear, "Congressmen and Clergy Prod Carter on Refugees," *New York Times*, May 13, 1980.

[43] House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The Refugee Act of 1979: Hearing before the Subcommittee on International Operations*, 96th Cong., 1st sess., September 19 and 25, 1979, 50-51.

Most of the Cubans who arrived during the early days of the boatlift had family members in south Florida.[45] About 2,000 of them were registered with the Cuban Refugee Program and released to their families, in keeping with the traditional policy. By May 1, however, the White House shut down the old process.[46] Not only did the traditional way of dealing with Cubans fly in the face of the Refugee Act, the Mariel boatlift catalyzed a new wave of charges that a racist double standard drove the disparate treatment of Cuban and Haitian migrants.[47] Whether intentional or not, Fidel Castro's decision to open up Mariel highlighted profound racial contradictions in U.S. immigration and refugee policy and forced the Carter administration to navigate ever-more treacherous political waters during an election year. Whereas some activists and politicians called for asylum for Haitians, the new Refugee Act meant that neither Haitians nor Cubans were necessarily eligible for entry. A decision to deport migrants from either group would draw intense criticism, as would a decision to grant them refugee status and receive them with entirely "open arms."[48]

The White House developed piecemeal solutions over the course of the summer of 1980. At the beginning of May, as the Cuban Refugee Program stopped registering new migrants, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) began working with various agencies to open processing sites and "holding centers" around Miami. Tamiami Park was the first major holding and processing site, then the Orange Bowl stadium became the principal holding center for Cubans with local relatives. Much of the screening and processing was conducted at Opa Locka Airport. At the Orange Bowl, Cubans were permitted to come and go during the day. The same could not be said for people sent to the detention center established at a former Army missile site on Krome Avenue. At the Krome detention center, INS guards guarded Cubans and Haitians who were locked behind fences. The government opened Krome as a "preprocessing holding center" for some 2,000 Cubans and later used it as an "overflow valve" for the Orange Bowl site.[49] By the end of May, immigration authorities began to detain Cubans in Krome if they went through processing at Opa Locka but had not yet connected with their family members. If 72 hours passed and they still did not have family members there to sponsor them, they were to be sent to one of the larger makeshift detention centers spread around the country.[50] Most incoming Haitians were sent to Krome by default until sponsorships could be arranged.[51]

---

[44] *Refugee Act of 1980*, Public Law 96-212, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 94 (1980): 102-118.

[45] Bach, Bach, and Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants,'" 33.

[46] Memo, George Putnam to Roger P. Winter, May 2, 1980, Folder "Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami," Box 1, CHTF.

[47] Letter, Margaret Bush Wilson to Jimmy Carter, June 20, 1980, Folder "Bohen Papers," Box 1, CHTF; Howard Kleinberg, "Put Pressure Where It Belongs: On Duvalier," *Miami News*, May 7, 1980.

[48] Jimmy Carter, "League of Women Voters Remarks and a Question and Answer Session at the League's Biennial" (speech), May 5, 1980, Washington, DC, *The American Presidency Project*, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33365.

As tensions mounted in south Florida, the Carter administration sought to disperse the growing number of Mariel migrants by sending those without local relatives to the detention centers recently set up on or near military bases in the northern Florida, Arkansas, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Those Cubans underwent health screenings and interviews with various law enforcement agencies before being cleared for release. In order to leave the "resettlement camps," they had to find sponsors willing to commit to finding them a job and a place to live. Since neither Cubans nor Haitians were classified as refugees at this point, the legal basis for their release stemmed from the parole authority granted to the U.S. Attorney General. The Carter administration added a formal dimension to this ad hoc and temporary parole status on June 20 when it created a new migrant category, marked on INS forms with stamps that read "Cuban-Haitian Entrant (Status Pending)." The INS drew on the discretionary power of the Attorney General to assign this status to all Cubans who had arrived since April 21 and all Haitians in immigration proceedings as of June 19. Cubans and Haitians in the "Cuban-Haitian Entrant" category became eligible for a number of social programs, and the White House backed legislation in subsequent months to give the new immigrants the benefits of refugees without assigning them refugee status. In the fall, the Carter administration extended the deadline for the freshly established migrant category to include people from Cuba and Haiti who arrived as late as October 10. Congress later passed laws to create a path to legal permanent residence for people with "Cuban-Haitian Entrant" status.[52]

---

[49] Memo, George Putnam to Roger P. Winter, May 7, 1980, Folder "Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami," Box 1, CHTF.

[50] "FCO Notes," May 29, 1980, Folder 6 "Gastón A. Fernández: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[51] Jana K. Lipman, "The Fish Trusts the Water, and It Is in the Water That It Is Cooked," *Radical History Review*, no. 115 (Winter 2013): 134.

The creation of "Cuban-Haitian Entrants" was a practical stopgap measure designed to uphold a changing refugee policy during a period of crisis. It was more than that, though. It merged Cubans and Haitians rhetorically and legally, threatening to blur the stark racial boundaries that had separated the two groups in south Florida. Prior to Mariel, the vast majority of Cubans in the U.S. had light skin and, although they were distinguished from "Anglos" in Miami, their status as "ethnic" whites or white Latins was well established. Haitians, on the other hand, were almost invariably perceived as "black," even when their language and nation of origin distinguished them from black Miamians. Despite the new joint legal category and the arrival of a large number of black and *mulato* Cubans from Mariel, the imagined Cuban-Haitian racial dichotomy remained in effect. Social justice organizations, politicians, and writers of myriad letters-to-editors demonstrated the persistence of this view by arguing that racism drove the disparate treatment of Haitians and Cubans. Recent scholarship demonstrates a renewed interest in the questions that advocates raised about the treatment of Haitian migrants in 1980. For years, Cubans received generous financial support and social services from the federal government while Haitians were detained and deported. During the Mariel boatlift, Haitians and Cubans at Krome detention center were separated into two areas, with Cubans at "Krome North" and Haitians at "Krome South." The detention center was located on the far eastern edge of Miami, adjacent to the Everglades, and life at Krome South was particularly bad. The land there was swampier even than the terrain just to its north, and it was plagued by snakes and swarms of mosquitos.[53] Such treatment and the continual surveillance and detention of Haitians led historian Jana K. Lipman to conclude that U.S. policies for Haitian migrants established "more enduring legal and political precedents" than the policies put in place for Cubans.[54]

---

[52] Thomas Higgins, "Action Transmittal," June 27, 1980, Folder "Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami" Box 1, CHTF; White House Press Office, "Cuban and Haitian Arrivals: Crisis and Response," June 30, 1980, Folder "Read 2 [1]," Box 16, CHTF; Press release, Cuban-Haitian Task Force Office of Public Affairs, October 21, 1980, Folder "Cuban/Haitian Task Force, Miami," Box 20, CHTF; Wasem, "Cuban Migration to the United States," 5–6.

Lipman's attention to the detention of Haitians is essential; it fills a major gap in the history of migration in the United States. However, in her argument that Haitians can tell historians *more* about the migrant detention system than Cubans, she neglects that thousands of Cubans also spent months and years in detention centers and prisons. Her framing is reminiscent of the position taken by the advocates of Haitian asylum seekers at the time, in that it obscures the fact that tens of thousands of Mariel migrants were black and *mulato*. In fact, Cubans with darker skin were more likely than their lighter compatriots to share experiences similar to Haitians. The crisis of the Mariel boatlift had forced the Carter administration to address inconsistencies in U.S. policy. Officials responded to charges of a racist double standard by directing federal agencies to detain migrants from both nations, but the new protocols and policies continued to divide people along racial lines.

---

[53] Lipman, "The Fish Trusts the Water, and It Is in the Water That It Is Cooked," 123–124.
[54] Ibid., 117.

Detaining Racial Bodies via Race-Neutral Policies

The Carter administration was slow to take responsibility for the Mariel migration crisis, in part because officials maintained that the boatlift was illegal. The Department of State first attempted to stem the tide of migrants by warning boat captains that they were subject to fines and prison terms for transporting "illegal aliens."[55] The White House initially refused to threaten the migrants with deportation, likely fearing political fallout among Cuban exiles and migrants in south Florida. But as fears spread about the type of people arriving in Key West, detention and deportation were back on the table. During the first week of the boatlift, as local and state leaders continued to manage portions of the increasingly chaotic processing effort, their findings seemed to confirm their suspicions. On April 29, Miami mayor Maurice Ferré told the press that local police had identified over 200 "single men" from Mariel who looked "suspicious," and half of them confessed to having criminal records. He called on officials to detain Mariel migrants for additional vetting if they arrived without family members.[56] Dade County officials considered young, single men to be "high risk" migrants and subjected them to rigorous examinations, which revealed that more than a few had had run-ins with the law in Cuba.[57]

Race was not named publicly as a risk factor, but that did not stop people involved in the processing effort from seeing color. Kate Dupes Hawk kept a journal while she volunteered at a south Florida processing center. On May 1, 1980, she wrote that about 1,700 "single black males arrived" during the previous night. Hawk continued, "No one comes during the day—especially criminals or undesirables."[58] Hawk correlated the arrival of a large group of black men with an influx of criminals. If immigration agents harbored similar associations, it would have shaped how they scrutinized young black and *mulato* Cubans, and it might have influenced their decisions about whom to let go and whom to lock up.

---

[55] Larry Wippman and Ana Veciana, "Second Wave of Rescue Boats Under Sail," *Miami News*, April 22, 1980.
[56] Dewar and Veciana, "New Fleet Heads for Cuba."
[57] Heather Dewar, "Cuban Tide of Refugees Swells Fast," *Miami News*, April 30, 1980.

The first Mariel migrants who admitted to having spent time in Cuban prisons were sent to the Federal Correctional Institution in Miami.[59] Haitians arriving during the same period also were detained there. With cell space limited, the INS started sending Cubans suspected of past crimes to the federal prison in Talladega, Alabama.[60] Soon, however, officials realized that many of the people who admitted to serving time in Cuba were not guilty of violent acts or major crimes. Immigration agents eventually determined that "the vast majority of those admitting to past criminal records were imprisoned for offenses not likely to require imprisonment in the U.S. (e.g. political crimes, petty theft, or loitering)."[61] Of the several hundred Mariel migrants sent to Talladega, over 200 were transferred out of the prison later in the summer because INS officials concluded that they did not represent a "threat to society." A few of the people in this group had committed violent crimes in Cuba, but most had stolen food, money, or supplies from government stores, used drugs, or participated in other activities judged to be counter-revolutionary. Some of them had been convicted of "homosexual acts."[62] Rather than taxing the limited capacity of federal prisons by incarcerating all Cubans with criminal records, the government began transporting most of them to Eglin Air Force Base in the Florida Panhandle, where the INS and the FBI conducted additional investigations. Most of the people in this group passed security checks and were deemed eligible for sponsorship.[63] The Carter administration maintained this policy as it opened additional detention centers on military bases in other states.

---

[58] Kate Dupes Hawk, Ron Villella, and Adolfo Leyva de Varona, *Florida and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980: The First Twenty Days*, ed. Kristen Cifers (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 123.

[59] Heather Dewar, "Key West Docks Jammed; Refugees Count Tops 5,800," *Miami News*, May 1, 1980.

[60] Associated Press, "Alien Suspects Held in Alabama Prison," *Miami News*, May 7, 1980.

[61] "Overview: Resettlement Camps, Chapter 2" (draft), September 25, 1981, Folder 1 "Barbara Lawson: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Documents, 1980-1981," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[62] "Fact Sheet: Release of Detainees from Talladega" (draft), August 1980, Folder "Talladega [Federal Correctional Institute]," Box 9, CHTF; "Move of Cuban Entrants from Talladega to Fort McCoy," August 13, 1980, Folder "Talladega [Federal Correctional Institute]," Box 9, CHTF.

During the screening process, federal agents found that many former prisoners had been convicted of violating the *ley de peligrosidad social* (law of social dangerousness).[64] The original *peligrosidad* statute was created in 1936, and it emerged out of criminological theories that also held that certain racial groups were genetically predisposed to commit crimes. In 1979, the Communist-led government amended the law to prioritize acts it considered antithetical to the construction of Cuban socialism, including homosexuality, vagrancy, dodging military service, and walking away from state-assigned work duties.[65] Alejandro de la Fuente has demonstrated that despite the change, the impact of the law remained consistent with its origins. He cites a 1986 study, which found that black Cubans in Havana were 7.6 times more likely than white Cubans to be charged with "social dangerousness." In what seems an uncanny reflection of Cuban racial categories, black Cubans were 3.4 times more likely than *mulatos* to be charged under this law. *Mulatos*, in turn, were just over 2.2 times more likely than whites to be charged with *peligrosidad*. De la Fuente observed that 84 percent of the people charged under the law were between sixteen and thirty years old and concluded that "[s]ocial dangerousness was essentially used to typify the conduct of blacks, particularly young blacks."[66] Considering the number of Mariel migrants who served prison sentences for *peligrosidad* and the disproportionate number of black and *mulato* Cubans who were charged with this crime, there is little room to doubt that racial disparities in the Cuban criminal justice system contributed to the racial disparities that emerged in U.S. detention centers.

---

[63] Bob Murphy, "U.S. to Take over Refugee Processing by Weekend," *Miami News*, May 2, 1980; "Overview: Resettlement Camps, Chapter 2" (draft), September 25, 1981, Folder 1 "Barbara Lawson: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Documents, 1980-1981," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[64] "Overview: Resettlement Camps, Chapter 2" (draft), September 25, 1981, Folder 1 "Barbara Lawson: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Documents, 1980-1981," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[65] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 314–315; Bach, Bach, and Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants,'" 46.

[66] de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 315.

That young black and *mulato* Cubans were more likely to have prison records than older, lighter Cubans would have reinforced any racial biases already held by immigration agents and volunteers. While some people involved in processing efforts may have tried to check their prejudices at the door, it would be naïve to ignore the significance of the long and well documented history of racialized crime reporting in the U.S. or to deny the influence of the images of dark-skinned men that frequently accompanied stories about alleged Mariel criminals.[67] In fact, achieving efficiency during the chaotic processing effort depended on the rapid judgment of immigration agents. Arturo Cobo, a veteran of the Bay of Pigs invasion who volunteered to help coordinate screening efforts during the boatlift, later expressed misgivings about the INS processing methods he witnessed. Cobo explained that immigration agents asked Mariel migrants—who had just arrived in a foreign country after an array of harrowing experiences—if they had ever committed a crime. "The refugees respond," Cobo said, "and that's when [INS officials] decide what kind of person [they] are. This [decision] was made in one minute."[68] These instantaneous decisions were complicated further by reports that many of the incoming migrants had lied to Cuban authorities about their past deeds in order to gain permission to leave the island. In the words of historian María Cristina García, "With one signature, decent, hard-working citizens established fictional records as burglars, arsonists, murderers, rapists, and CIA agents."[69] Like other new arrivals, Maria Theresa Carril informed immigration officers in Key West that she had lied about being gay and a drug user so that

---

[67] On crime reporting, see Stabile, *White Victims, Black Villains*.
[68] Hawk, Villella, and Leyva de Varona, *Florida and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980*, 56.
[69] García, *Havana USA*, 63.

Cuban officials would let her leave.[70] INS agents did not have the ability to verify such stories or conduct lengthy investigations at the point of entry. They had to base their judgments on what they saw, what each individual told them, and what they heard from others coming in on the boats. Thus, there was ample room for rumor, prejudice, and misinformation to sway their decisions. After hasty conversations, immigration agents made a simple annotation in a file that marked people permanently as criminals.[71] The "2-C" used to designate criminal migrants in INS records affected some Cubans from Mariel for the rest of their lives.

Even if officials made efforts to check their biases and remain skeptical of rumors, mistranslations could lead to tragic mistakes, and translators were not always adequate. Unaware of what was in his INS record, one *marielito* told a Cuban-born administrator at a U.S. detention camp that he had been in prison in Cuba "*por violar la ley*" (for breaking the law). Evidently, whoever conducted his initial processing interview abbreviated this response in his file. His record read simply that he had been incarcerated "*por violar*" (for committing rape).[72] The Cuban government's extensive use of the *ley de peligrosidad social* contributed to such misunderstandings. If translators were unfamiliar with the Cuban penal code, they may have assumed that a *marielito* who claimed to have spent time in prison for "dangerousness" was one of the "hardened criminals" they kept hearing about.[73] The racially disparate enforcement of the *peligrosidad* law in Cuba meant that black and *mulato* Cubans were more likely to be affected by such translation errors.

---

[70] Marilyn A. Moore, "U.S. Agents Weeding Out Criminals in Alien Exodus," *Miami News*, May 8, 1980.

[71] Hawk, Villella, and Leyva de Varona, *Florida and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980*, 56.

[72] Siro del Castillo, interview with the author, October 29, 2015. Siro del Castillo was a political prisoner in Cuba who migrated to the United States in the 1970s. He directed the Krome immigrant detention and processing center in Florida during the Mariel boatlift and became the director of Human Relations in the detention center at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, after it became a holding site for Cubans who had trouble finding sponsors.

[73] I owe this insight to Eduardo Gamarra, interview with the author. Gamarra reviewed the files of Cubans in several detention centers and often found errors.

The other key factor in the racial disparities that emerged in detention centers was the Carter administration's decision to prioritize Cubans with family members already living in the United States. At about the same time that the INS began sending Mariel migrants suspected of minor offenses to Eglin Air Force Base, the federal government determined that it would permit those with relatives in south Florida to remain in the Miami area, either at a temporary shelter or in the homes of their relatives.[74] Life in the shelters, including the Orange Bowl and later the "Tent City" erected under I-95 in Little Havana, was not good. In general, though, Cubans permitted to remain in the Miami area enjoyed more independence and flexibility than the Mariel migrants sent to detention centers in other states. The new arrivals who remained in south Florida could come and go throughout the day. For a time, they benefitted from the substantial support of the many Cuban exiles and migrants who volunteered to provide food, comfort, connections, and shelter to the new arrivals. They did not have to endure the same uncertainty that their fellow migrants faced during long stints locked up in detention centers dispersed around the country.

Since the decision to detain Cubans without relatives in south Florida was officially race-neutral, its impact is often interpreted as the unintended consequence of earlier migration patterns. Over 95 percent of the Cubans who entered the U.S. between 1959 and 1979 were white.[75] White Cubans from Mariel were thus more likely to have relatives already living in the U.S. who could sponsor them. This pattern undoubtedly contributed to the fact that black and *mulato* Cubans accounted for just 10 percent of the Mariel migrants processed and released in south Florida but made up 50 percent of the people sent to the detention centers at Fort Eglin, Fort Chaffee, Fort Indiantown Gap, and Fort McCoy.[76] The Carter administration decision made logistical sense: why transport people halfway across the country when they had family members nearby who could take them off the government's hands? The policy was pragmatic, indeed, but it was also politically expedient. It reflected the influence and resources of the Cubans who began entering the United States in the early 1960s, at a time when many officials saw migrants from communist nations as evidence of the superiority of capitalism and liberal democracy. The Kennedy administration created the Cuban Refugee program for those Cubans in 1961, bestowing them with financial assistance and an extensive support program. Many of the first post-revolutionary migrants were elites with political connections and business relationships in the United States. Most of those who followed soon after were well-educated professionals. Almost all of them were white.[77] In 1966, at the start of a second wave of Cuban migration that included more middle- and working-class people—but few who were not white—Congress passed the Cuban Adjustment Act. This amendment to federal immigration law provided Cubans, and only Cubans, with a fast-track to permanent residence. In 1980, as a new influx of migrants overwhelmed south Florida, the federal government once again chose a policy that played to the interests of the Cubans who arrived in earlier years. This time, though, there were some Cubans who lost out, and a disproportionate number of them were black or *mulato*.

---

[74] Memo, George Putnam to Roger P. Winter, May 2, 1980, Folder "Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami," Box 1, CHTF; Murphy, "U.S. to Take over Refugee Processing by Weekend."

[75] García, *Havana USA*, 68.

[76] Bach, Bach, and Triplett, "The Flotilla 'Entrants,'" 33.

White House efforts to stop the boatlift were scrutinized closely, which revealed that the influence of established Cubans in south Florida weighed heavily on government decisions. On May 14, Carter announced a new policy designed to curtail the influx of Mariel migrants. Consonant with the emphasis on family reunification in the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and in an effort to comply with the recently enacted Refugee Act of 1980, the President determined, "Priority will be given to political prisoners, to close relatives of U.S. permanent residents, and to persons who sought freedom in the Peruvian Embassy and in our Interest Section last month."[78] The federal government sought to stem the rapid and chaotic flow of people leaving from Mariel and put pressure on Castro to agree to terms that included giving the U.S. the opportunity to screen migrants before they left Cuba. Law enforcement officials at Key West began impounding boats with Cubans from Mariel, Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti promised to prosecute captains who transported migrants, and the Coast Guard transmitted radio messages warning of fines for boat owners who refused to comply with U.S. immigration laws. Jack Watson, a close advisor to the President, noted that the crackdown would not have been possible in the previous weeks because established Cubans in Miami insisted on using the boatlift as an opportunity to bring their relatives from the island to Florida. Watson explained to the *Washington Post* that Cubans in Miami became "disenchanted" with the boatlift when they realized that many of the people arriving were not the ones for whom they had sent.[79] The anti-Castro fervor that drove early support for the boatlift among Cubans in Miami subsided when the motley makeup of the new migrants became apparent.

---

[77] Duany, "Cuban Communities in the United States: Migration Waves, Settlement Patterns and Socioeconomic Diversity," 76.

As much as interests and influence mattered, it is important to note that the Mariel boatlift truly was a period of chaos. Daily reports from Miami to Washington relayed major concerns among federal agencies, including an insufficient number of translators and other staff.[80] At one point, health screenings were delayed simply because aid workers could not access a copy machine.[81] There were frequent memos regarding funding troubles; tensions developed between agencies over which would be left with the bill for various services.[82] Interagency feuds over finances became a running theme in the federal response to the boatlift, even after the Carter administration set up the Cuban-Haitian Task Force to manage resettlement efforts. Mistakes and misconceptions were to be expected in such a chaotic environment, and they underlined the extent to which outcomes were never predetermined. But the interplay among racialized media representations and institutions, racist perceptions, and existing social structures in both Cuba and the U.S. worked within the crisis context such that the people most likely to be detained during the first months of the Mariel boatlift were black and *mulato*.

---

[78] Jimmy Carter, "Cuban Refugees White House Statement on the Administration Policy Toward the Refugees" (speech), May 14, 1980, Washington, DC, *The American Presidency Project,* http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33413.

[79] Schram and Babcock, "President Moves to Halt Illegal Cuban Boatlift."

[80] Memo, George Putnam to Roger P. Winter, May 11, 1980, Folder "Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami," Box 1, CHTF.

[81] Memo, George Putnam to Roger P. Winter, May 8, 1980, Folder "Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami," Box 1, CHTF.

Conclusion

In May and June, the Carter administration began honing a message designed to justify the President's policy choices. In his May 14 statement outlining the government's plans for stopping the boatlift and receiving the incoming Cubans, Jimmy Carter qualified his earlier promise to "provide an open heart and open arms to refugees seeking freedom from Communist domination and from economic deprivation."[83] He noted that some migrants would be welcome—those with close relatives in the U.S. and those who were obvious political dissidents—but he emphasized, "We will not permit our country to be used as a dumping ground for criminals who represent a danger to our society."[84] Carter's tough rhetoric notwithstanding, the small number of people whom the INS identified as threats enabled officials to craft a more subtle message that minimized the importance of the incoming "hardened criminals." In a late-May memorandum to Congress, Assistant Secretary of State J. Brian Atwood explained that

---

[82] Memo, Nathan J. Stark to Jack Watson, June 17, 1980, Folder "Cuban Situation: Reports to the White House," Box 1, CHTF; Memo, George Putnam to Roger P. Winter, May 20, 1980, Folder "Cuban Situation: Daily Reports-Miami," Box 1, CHTF.

[83] Jimmy Carter, "League of Women Voters Remarks and a Question and Answer Session at the League's Biennial."

[84] Jimmy Carter, "Cuban Refugees White House Statement on the Administration Policy Toward the Refugees."

"less than 1% of the arrivals have been detained as suspected felons."[85] That figure became part of the standard language Carter administration officials used to describe the new Cuban migrants. Spokespeople for various agencies implied that the period of panic in early May was unjustified and characterized the vast majority of the new arrivals as part of a long tradition of 'good,' 'hard-working' immigrants in search of a 'better life.' Officials began urging people in the U.S. not to permit a few "bad apples to ruin the reputation of the more than 125,000 Cubans who risked everything to flee a life of tyranny and oppression."[86] This language, infused with both humanitarian and anti-communist rhetoric, was used by public affairs officials to prepare Cuban-Haitian Task Force administrators for questions from reporters. Letters in response to concerned citizens also came to rely on boilerplate language. In a typical reply, Task Force Director Frederick M. Bohen urged a Los Angeles couple not to "let a small percentage of undesirables ruin the reputation of Cubans who risked everything to flee the oppression in the their homeland."[87] Minimizing the significance of the "bad apples" thus became a constant refrain among Carter administration leaders.

Despite these efforts, perceptions of Mariel migrants as dangerous criminals remained prevalent. There is still work to be done to combat the pervasive myth that the Cubans who crossed the Straits of Florida in 1980 were largely criminals.[88] Yet using empirical evidence to battle the "Scarface Legacy" is precarious because the message that 'most' Cubans from Mariel were 'good' people reinforces the discourse of criminality that emerged during their migration.

---

[85] J. Brian Atwood, "Foreign Affairs Memorandum: The Cuban Exodus," May 1980, Folder "Reading File," Box 16, CHTF.

[86] Memo, Art Brill to Larry Kullman, October 8, 1980, Folder "Cuban/Haitian Task Force," Box 20, CHTF.

[87] Letter, Frederick M. Bohen to Mr. and Mrs. Paul T. Washington, November 5, 1980, Folder "INS [1]," Box 36, CHTF.

[88] Kyle Munzenrieder, "100 Years: The Dark and Dirty History of Miami Beach," *Miami New Times*, March 26, 2015, http://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/100-years-the-dark-and-dirty-history-of-miami-beach-7552169 (accessed November 14, 2015).

Scholars who have taken this approach have reinforced the precise message the U.S. government began sending after the initial panic wore off. Implicit in such framings was the notion that there was a small group of truly "undesirable" people who entered the United States. As this chapter has shown, criminality and undesirability were constructed out of much more than a person's record of illegal activity. Unless scholars interrogate these classificatory schemes, they risk reproducing the same categories of humanness that were used later to justify the indefinite detention of thousands of people from Mariel.[89]

The second chapter takes up this task, investigating how the state continued to divide and categorize the Cubans it confined in its makeshift detention centers on U.S. military bases. The initial racial impact of the Mariel boatlift was evident in the disproportionate detention of black and *mulato* Cubans. The next chapter explores these spaces, how they were governed, and the ways in which contradictory humanitarian and punitive impulses were threaded through the ostensibly color-blind management of Carter's "resettlement camps." The forms of power that gained energy in the crisis moment of the Mariel boatlift stemmed from an array of sources in both Cuba and the U.S., including media representations, systems of policing and incarceration, historical patterns of migration and wealth, and individual interactions. To see how these forces continued to work over the course of the ensuing months, and to see how they might have worked differently, it is important to understand the relationship between what went on in the White House and what happened down on the ground. The following chapter turns, then, to the detention centers.

---

[89] Here I draw on the critique of such classificatory schemes developed by Katherine McKittrick in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), and, in particular, her elaboration on Sylvia Wynter's theories of the "inventions of Man" and "poverty archipelagos," 124-132.

CHAPTER 3

"THE HOLY AND SACRED LAND OF FREEDOM CITY"

Over the course of about two weeks in May, the U.S. government flew some 19,000 Mariel migrants from south Florida to northwest Arkansas. Their destination was Fort Chaffee, a U.S. Army base just a few miles from the Oklahoma border. The first 128 Cubans arrived by plane on the night of May 9, and they were greeted by a man dressed in the white hood and robes of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klansman, "Mac" McCarty, ran out towards the runway and screamed a warning to officials not to let them in because they were "hoodlums" who were going to get on "welfare" and "get a free ride for everything."[1] Many of the residents of Fort Smith, Barling, and several other towns near Fort Chaffee harbored similar concerns. The criminal reputation of the people from Mariel preceded them, generating tensions that were on full display in late May, when hundreds of Cubans left the area meant to hold them. As the group walked along the road to Barling, the residents took up arms and blocked the migrants' path. Some of them rode out on horseback to face the Cubans. The police intervened in an effort to prevent bloodshed and requested help from anybody who could speak Spanish. They found Eduardo Gamarra, a Bolivian who had recently graduated from the University of Arkansas and taken a job as a refugee relocator for the Red Cross at Fort Chaffee. Gamarra pleaded with the Cubans to stop and sit down so they could talk; he warned them that if they continued walking, the Barling residents might open fire on them. The Cubans were frustrated by delays in processing that kept them confined to the makeshift detention center, and they were eager to begin their lives in the United States. Gamarra tried to reassure them that he would work to help them find people to sponsor their release, and eventually the Cubans agreed to return to the base. As they neared the fence, the Barling residents charged after them and pushed some of them over it, forcing them back into the detention area.[2]

---

[1] William K. Stevens, "Arkansas Fort Receives First of Thousands of Cubans," *New York Times,* May 10, 1980.

Gamarra was surprised when he turned on the news that evening and saw a report about a "sit-in protest in the street" orchestrated by Cubans at Fort Chaffee. He said that was his first lesson in the way "news can distort things."[3] Of course, this was neither the first nor the last time that media outlets misrepresented the people who had left Cuba from Mariel. During the summer months, unrest grew in the four sites the Carter administration established for Mariel migrants who did not have relatives in the Miami area and those who were suspected of past crimes in Cuba. The Carter administration deemed these sites "resettlement camps," and officials sometimes referred to them as "processing" or "holding centers." In reality, "detention center" was a more accurate term. These spaces were heavily guarded, and most were enclosed by fences and barbed wire. They were used to confine migrants who were subject to curfews and a long list of other restrictions developed by bureaucrats and enforced by security personnel. The first such site consisted of tents set up on the fairgrounds adjacent to Eglin Air Force Base in the Florida Panhandle. Fort Chaffee was the next detention center to open. As the Cuban population at Chaffee neared capacity, the federal government began sending new arrivals to Fort Indiantown Gap in east-central Pennsylvania and Fort McCoy in west-central Wisconsin.

Each of the ad hoc detention centers became the subject of news stories about unrest and violence among detained Cubans in the summer of 1980. The first so-called "riot" occurred at

---

[2] Gamarra, interview with the author.
[3] Ibid.

Fort Chaffee on June 1, when a group of several hundred Mariel migrants marched toward a gate while chanting "*Libertad!*" (Freedom!) and climbed out of the detention area. When state police began beating them with their batons, the Cubans started throwing rocks and chunks of concrete at them. Police eventually opened fire, causing most of the Cubans to retreat to the base, where they proceeded to set fire to a number of buildings and barricades. Law enforcement authorities then sealed off the base and suppressed the uprising. When a reporter returned to Fort Chaffee later that night, he noticed traces of tear gas in the air.[4] These events received extensive national press coverage, which reinforced notions that the Cubans from Mariel were, at best, "troublemakers" and, at worst, "hardened criminals." The Fort Chaffee incident prompted Carter's press secretary, Jody Powell, to make a statement emphasizing that the White House would take a tough stance to ensure that no "undesirables" were permitted to remain in the United States of America. Over 100 Cubans at Fort Chaffee were put in the stockade for their involvement in the June 1 riot, and most of this group was transferred to an INS prison soon after.[5] Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton immediately appealed to the White House for military assistance and called for tighter security at the base.[6]

The detention centers of the Carter administration became sites of intensive surveillance, policing, and punishment. Yet no entity asserted complete control within the bases, which functioned like small, militarized cities. In fact, at its peak population of over 20,000 people, Fort Chaffee would have been the third largest city in Arkansas.[7] A complex array of disciplinary processes took hold there.[8] Physical violence was used to maintain order in a number of instances, but Cuban-Haitian Task Force officials exercised less obvious forms of coercion, as well, often in the interest of promoting assimilation to an idealized "American way." Administrators dissected the population of new arrivals to identify those who would be targeted for integration into the dominant society and those who would be weeded out, discarded, and locked away. Harry T. Johnson Jr., the Task Force director for Fort Indiantown Gap, likened this process to that of a gastrointestinal tract. He wrote to his boss in Washington to explain that there was a "recycling of offenders" in Indiantown Gap and blamed "constipation in INS channels" for his inability to get rid of Cubans who broke rules or laws. Migrants accused of committing crimes or otherwise upsetting the order at Indiantown Gap were not sent away to prisons but released into the general detention center population after periods of confinement in stockades or other highly secure segregation areas within the base. Johnson described this as a "kind of regurgitation without digestion." The "real answer," he surmised, "lies in the final expulsion from the whole body of Ft Indiantown Gap of these totally indigestibles."[9] It did not take a physician to know what his metaphor implied about the nature of the people who would be expelled via his solution.

---

[4] News Services, "Cubans Riot at Center in Arkansas," *Washington Post*, June 2, 1980.
[5] Charles R. Babcock, "U.S. to Bar Cuban Criminals, Rioters at Fort Chaffee," *Washington Post*, June 8, 1980.
[6] News Services, "Cubans Riot at Center in Arkansas."
[7] Shull, "'Nobody Wants These People': Reagan's Immigration Crisis and the Containment of Foreign Bodies," 250.
[8] The analysis of surveillance and discipline in detention centers presented here draws on the theories of social control articulated in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

A close reading of government memoranda, daily reports, national and local media accounts, and newspapers produced within the detention centers enables an understanding of this digestive process. Intertwined with the punitive practices advocated by Harry Johnson was the humanitarian rhetoric that Jimmy Carter had utilized throughout his presidency. Carter eventually moved the oversight of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force from the State Department to the Department of Health and Human Services for a reason. To a significant extent, his administration treated the resettlement of Mariel migrants as a human rights issue. It was his inclination to speak in such terms that led to his ad lib about offering Cubans “an open heart and open arms” during his May 5 address to the League of Women Voters.[10] That improvisation cost him, however, when fears about the makeup of the newcomers began to spread and the number of arrivals in the “Freedom Flotilla” continued to grow.[11] Hence his backpedaling in his statement on May 14, in which he asserted that the U.S. would not be a “dumping ground for criminals.”[12] Those two sets of remarks, just nine days apart, encapsulated the dual impulses that characterized the Carter administration’s approach to detained Mariel migrants: one humanitarian, the other punitive. The Cubans detained were constructed variously as “undesirables” and “troublemakers,” “law-abiding” and “freedom-seeking.” The Cubans themselves both contested and reinforced those constructions. Some Mariel migrants accepted the civilizing mission of the Task Force under the Carter administration. They embraced discourses of assimilation and respectability and admonished their compatriots who broke rules or challenged authorities. Other Cubans resisted their confinement. They escaped and protested and fought.

---

[9] Memo, Harry T. Johnson, Jr. to Christian Holmes, September 6, 1980, Folder "Fort McCoy [2]," Box 4, CHTF.

The law enforcement and military response to resistance was to contain the bodies of Cubans who stepped out of line. They took “troublemakers” to the stockades. The bureaucratic equivalent was to count, classify, and filter the new migrants. Officials within the Cuban-Haitian Task Force worked to separate “unaccompanied minors” from adults. They grouped families and single women together. They segregated young, single men. Administrators meticulously counted everyone in each space. Yet one category was almost always left out of daily memoranda and statistical reports: race. Government records silenced the whiteness and blackness of Cubans for most of the summer. Chapter 4 will return to the project begun in Chapter 2, locating race in the synthesis of silences and mentions embedded in bureaucratic files, press accounts, and individual stories. This chapter narrows its focus to a fine-grained analysis of governance in the detention centers in order to illustrate the balancing act between humanitarian and punitive approaches performed by a range of actors. It shows the ways in which these two impulses worked within the detention centers of the Carter administration to transform Mariel migrants from "undesirables" to "unsponsorables." Official discourses surrounding this process were color-blind, but ultimately it would become clear that this transformation was part of a racial project.

---

[10] Jimmy Carter, “League of Women Voters Remarks and a Question and Answer Session at the League’s Biennial” (speech), May 5, 1980, Washington, DC, *The American Presidency Project*, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33365.

[11] Martin Schram and Charles R. Babcock, “President Moves to Halt Illegal Boatlift,” *Washington Post*, May 15, 1980.

[12] Jimmy Carter, “Cuban Refugees White House Statement on the Administration Policy Toward the Refugees” (speech), May 14, 1980, Washington, DC, *The American Presidency Project,* http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33413.

"Camp" Life

The first space the government created to detain Cubans without family in the Miami area was on about 30 acres of hot, dry fairgrounds next to Eglin Air Force Base in the Florida Panhandle. At its peak in the middle of May, the population of Mariel migrants held at Eglin was just over 10,000. Cubans crowded into 800-square-foot tents, which were surrounded by a chain-link fence. Eglin was always meant to be a temporary home for the new arrivals, and six voluntary agencies (VOLAGS) worked with Cubans held there to connect them with sponsors who committed to finding them jobs and places to live. The Public Health Service (PHS) conducted health screenings at Eglin and, despite rumors circulating about the number of new migrants with tuberculosis and syphilis, medical personnel found that the rate of such illnesses was consistent with the rates for the overall populations of Cuba and Haiti. The PHS concluded that the newcomers presented “no significant public health concerns.”[13] The Air Force, Army, and U.S. Marshals were responsible for securing the perimeter of the “camp” and policing the interior. The INS and FBI investigated Cubans to determine whether they had committed criminal acts in Cuba that would have been considered felonies in the United States. Most were cleared by these agencies and eventually found sponsors. The INS transferred just over 350 Cubans to federal prisons or mental institutions after their investigations, which often depended on incomplete and second-hand information from people in the detention center.[14]

Mariel migrants sent to the three other large detention centers that the Carter administration opened over the next few weeks went through a similar screening process. Like Eglin Air Force Base, Fort Chaffee and Fort Indiantown Gap were used in 1975 to hold people from southeast Asia who fled the Vietnam War and the violence it precipitated in surrounding nations. Fort McCoy, where the last military base detention center was established for Cubans from Mariel, was the only site not used to detain and process southeast Asians in the previous decade, but during World War II it was used to detain 172 Japanese-born residents of Hawaii.[15] In the ensuing years, McCoy was used to detain German, Japanese, and, later, Korean prisoners of war.[16] At times the resettlement of Cubans moved at a considerable pace, but the initial screening at each site tended to be slow, as migrants came in and government and voluntary agencies got their staffs in place. While the level of security varied at each base, in general the perimeters were heavily guarded by military police. Many of the fences were reinforced with barbed wire. Each detention center was divided into several sections with various law enforcement agencies responsible for specific areas. Representatives from the U.S. Marshals Service, the Border Patrol, the Federal Protective Service, and the U.S. Park Police did most of the policing within the detention centers.[17] The combined Cuban population of Eglin, Chaffee, Indiantown Gap, and McCoy peaked on June 7, at which point about 53,000 people were living in the four detention centers.[18] A total of about 62,000 people were held in one or more of these sites at some point. Fort Chaffee and Fort Indiantown Gap held the largest groups, each of which peaked at about 19,000 people.[19]

---

[13] Memo, Nathan J. Stark to Jack Watson, May 19, 1980, Folder “Cuban Situation: Reports to the White House,” Box 1, CHTF.

[14] Letter, Silvia M. Unzueta to Tom Casey, June 12, 1980, Folder 5 “Gastón A. Fernández: Consolidation, 1980,” Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC; Warren Brown, “Hours and Days of Red Tape Anger Refugees and Families,” *Washington* Post, May 28, 1980.

[15] “Camp McCoy (detention center,” *Densho Encyclopedia*, accessed April 15, 2016, http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Camp%20McCoy%20%28detention%20facility%29/.

[16] “Fort McCoy History,” United States Army, access April 15, 2016, http://www.mccoy.army.mil/AboutUs/history.asp.

The federal government never intended for Cubans to remain confined in the city of tents adjacent to Eglin Air Force Base, which was reflected in the lack of resources there. Though a delegation from the Spanish American League Against Defamation in Miami was impressed by the cleanliness and order they observed at Eglin, and they remarked on the dedication of government employees, they expressed concerns about the tedium of life for Cubans in the detention center. Fort Chaffee, by contrast, was replete with recreational and educational opportunities. Soldiers assigned to Chaffee organized baseball leagues in which both Mariel migrants and U.S. troops participated. Civilians organized English classes and a priest held a Catholic Mass every morning. The base movie theater showed popular films like *The Great Santini*; KNJB, the base radio station, broadcast salsa and other popular Cuban music.[20] Similar recreational opportunities existed at Fort McCoy, and at Fort Indiantown Gap, Mariel migrants enjoyed rock concerts and a circus "complete with elephants and acrobats."[21] The Indiantown Gap radio station aired recitations of poems written by detained Cubans and performances of famous plays, including Federico García Lorca's *Yerma*.[22] Staff members at the detention centers developed Spanish-language and bilingual newspapers, and some Mariel migrants helped produce these publications. Detained Cubans also fought off the ever-present threat of boredom by volunteering to join work groups in several of the detention centers. In the Gap, as the Pennsylvania base was known, volunteers painted and repaired buildings, built picnic tables, and constructed barbeque pits. An article in *La Libertad*, the bilingual daily newspaper produced by Army personnel and Cuban volunteers at Fort Indiantown Gap, praised such "willing workers."[23]

---

[17] "Memorandum of Understanding Between Offices of US Marshal, FBI, INS, Cuban Refugee Task Force Commander (Army)," May 10, 1980, Folder 3 "Gastón A. Fernández: Security Reports and Memoranda, 1980," Box 2, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[18] Memo, John W. Macy, Jr. to Eugene Eidenberg, June 27, 1980, Folder 5 "Gastón A. Fernández: Consolidation, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[19] *La Libertad* (Fort Indiantown Gap) II, no. 7, June 11, 1980, Folder "La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80," Box 36, CHTF.

[20] Letter, Silvia M. Unzueta to Tom Casey, June 12, 1980; *Chaffeegram* (Fort Chaffee) 1, no. 2, May 15, 1980, Folder 2 "Gastón A. Fernández: Refugee Testimonials, Camp Guide, Chaffeegram Newsletters, n.d., 1980," Box 2, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC; *Chaffeegram* 1, no. 3, May 16, 1980, Folder 2 "Gastón A. Fernández: Refugee Testimonials, Camp Guide, Chaffeegram Newsletters, n.d., 1980," Box 2, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

Volunteers, employees, and detained Mariel migrants themselves made concerted efforts to make "camp" life bearable. There was even a wedding held for two detainees at the smaller Krome detention center near Miami.[24] Seeing the various entertainment opportunities and activities at the bases would have made it hard for people in the U.S. to see why Cubans tended to become frustrated with their experiences in those spaces. Many in the U.S. felt that Cubans should be grateful for the opportunity to live in the United States, whether or not it meant living in a makeshift detention center. Cuban protests, "riots," and escape attempts were met with little sympathy. Rather, local residents tended to see these happenings as signs of ingratitude and proof that the new arrivals from Cuba were "undesirables." People in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and the smaller towns surrounding Fort Chaffee found a foil for the Cuban migrants in the southeast

---

[21] Letter, Diana H. Schutte to Steve Beck, August 27, 1980, Folder "Camp Consolidation [2]," Box 1, CHTF.
[22] *La Libertad* IV, no. 1, August 1, 1980, Folder "La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80," Box 36, CHTF.
[23] *La Libertad* III, no 2, July 2, 1980, Folder "La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80," Box 36, CHTF.
[24] "FCO Notes," June 9, 1980, Folder 6 "Gastón A. Fernández: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

Asian people who were held there just five years prior. Arvel "Buddy" Acoach, an Arkansas State Police officer, later reflected on his encounters with both groups of migrants. He insisted, "There was no correlation between the Vietnamese and the Cubans. The style of people we were dealing with was 180 degrees from each other. The Vietnamese were glad to be here and were supportive of the United States. The Cubans were kicked out of the jails and nut houses [in Cuba]."[25]

In his critique, Acoach actually revealed something about the distinct contexts surrounding the arrivals of Cubans and southeast Asians. Unlike the people whom the U.S. government transported from Vietnam in 1975, the incoming Cubans in 1980 came on their own, and they were criminalized and variously stigmatized before they ever set foot on U.S. soil. Cuban migrants likely knew that their compatriots who made the same trip by sea or by air in previous years were greeted by a highly accommodating U.S. government. They expected similar treatment. After all, the President of the United States had called on his country to welcome the new migrants with an "open arms."[26] Their expectations understandably were distinct from those of refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Besides, while there were significant efforts to make the detention centers hospitable, even maximum security prisons in the U.S. feature recreational and educational opportunities. Moreover, it is crucial to consider the agenda that underpinned the programs inside the detention centers: they were meant to stave off boredom, yes, but their larger purpose was to maintain order and promote assimilation.

---

[25] Arvel "Buddy" Acoach, interview with Michael Lindsey (transcript), June 9, 2004, *Arkansas State Police Project*, Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, AR.

[26] Carter, "League of Women Voters Remarks and a Question and Answer Session at the League's Biennial" (speech), May 5, 1980.

“American Ways”

Administrators at the detention center at Fort Indiantown Gap referred to it as “*Ciudad Libertad*” (Freedom City). Such doublespeak often made its way into communications between authorities and detained Cubans. The newspaper at Indiantown Gap, *La Libertad*, emphasized that U.S. officials wanted “everyone at Freedom City to start off well and with a good record when you begin your new life in the United States.”[27] In part, starting off on the right foot meant learning “American Ways,” which was also the title of a regular column in the detention center newspaper. In one edition of “Modos de Vida Norteamericana” (“American Ways”), an unnamed author outlined the functions of various government entities. On the subject of law enforcement, the author wrote that the job of the police was to “protect your property and you,” in that order.[28] The importance of protecting property was reiterated prominently and consistently in discussions of security at the various detention centers. Another edition of “American Ways” focused on what it meant to “be on time” in the United States. The author, Jorge Frometa, was a Mariel migrant detained at Fort Indiantown Gap who volunteered as a translator for *La Libertad*. Frometa noted that arriving punctually in Cuba “did not really matter so much,” but being late could “insult or hurt the American.” He continued, “If you can not adjust to that way here, an employer who sees you are not punctual will not want you to work for him and you could lose your job.”[29]

Although one purpose of these columns was pragmatic—people really could get fired for arriving late to work—a broader aim was to present a specific image of U.S. society and to urge new migrants to adjust to fit that particular representation. Frometa became a regular columnist for *La Libertad* and continued to write after he was sponsored and released. His reflections mixed anthropological observations, such as his notes on events known as "parties" that people in the U.S. used to entertain their friends, with celebrations of supposed national values, like the "American tradition" of helping others.[30] The column promoted compliance and assimilation. Shortly after getting released, Frometa promised to help Cubans who remained inside Indiantown Gap "know the most important aspects of the American way of life, to which you will have to adapt." He wrote to his "Cuban friends" still detained in the Gap to tell them "how easy it is to make friends with the people of the United States," provided that their "behavior [was] good and in accordance with the rules of living together in this society." He addressed them directly: "You must be respectful and you must not talk about things you do not know about and, above all, not intrude in matters or conversations that do not concern you."[31] It seems that there were many rules that one had to follow to earn a friendly welcome.

---

[27] *La Libertad* II, no. 15, June 23, 1980, Folder “La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80,” Box 36, CHTF.

[28] *La Libertad* III, no. 4, July 7, 1980, Folder “La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80,” Box 36, CHTF.

[29] *La Libertad* III, no. 19, July 28, 1980, Folder “La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80,” Box 36, CHTF.

The process of indoctrination extended beyond personal interactions to incorporate narratives of U.S. history. Staff at Eglin, Chaffee, Indiantown Gap, and McCoy planned events so that Cubans and staff could "co-celebrate" U.S. Independence Day on July 4 with "sport events, sing-a-longs, patriotic readings, band concerts, art exhibits, dance recitals and fireworks."[32] The version of U.S. history told by Cuban-Haitian Task Force administrators revealed much about the image of the nation that they wanted to convey to Cubans who were then residing in militarized detention centers. Writing in *La Libertad* at Fort Indiantown Gap,

---

[30] *La Libertad* IV, no. 1, August 1, 1980; *La Libertad* III, no. 13, July 18, 1980, Folder "La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80," Box 36, CHTF.
[31] *La Libertad* IV, no. 1, August 1, 1980. Some translations modified by the author to improve accuracy.
[32] Memo, John W. Macy, Jr. to Eugene Eidenberg, July 4, 1980, Folder 5 "Gastón A. Fernández: Consolidation, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

Susan Gooding explained that the "Founding Fathers" were "righteous men" and emphasized that in "such chaotic times, the workers, farmers and common people needed leaders they could depend on, someone to lead them to victory against the British and afterwards be worthy of governing the new nation."[33] In another article about the U.S. War for Independence, readers learned that, "For the first time in history, a group of communities took it upon themselves to revolt and form a new nation based on a proclamation of universal human rights."[34] Apparently the Haitian Revolution was of little import, and the fact that slavery would remain legal in the U.S. for another hundred years was inconsequential.

The Fourth of July marked a new focus in *La Libertad* on historical figures in the United States, most of whom were U.S. presidents and almost all of whom were white men. Short, heroic biographies of leaders like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson soon became mainstays in the reading materials distributed to Cubans in the Gap. The entry on Jefferson noted simply that he was born on a "farm." The biography on Andrew Jackson included that he "attacked and annihilated a large force of Creek Indians," but only as a prelude to his victory at the Battle of New Orleans. Helping to eradicate indigenous peoples was but a brief detour along his path to becoming "national hero." According to the passage, Jackson died "surrounded by his grieving slaves" and remained as "tough as hickory and straight as an arrow to the end."[35] There were even awkward efforts to link the stories of Cubans from Mariel to popular notions of the U.S. nation. Brigadier General Grail L. Brookshire, the Task Force Commander at Indiantown Gap, wrote on July 4, " It is obviously appropriate that we celebrate Independence Day in

---

[33] *La Libertad* III, no. 3, July 3, 1980, Folder "La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80," Box 36, CHTF. Note that in the Spanish version, the "Founding Fathers" are referred to as "*hombres honrados*," which could be translated as "honest men." "Righteous" was the adjective that appeared in the original English version.
[34] *La Libertad,* Edición Especial, July 4, 1980, Folder "La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80," Box 36, CHTF.
[35] *La Libertad* III, no. 19, July 28, 1980.

Freedom City since the Cubans have also come here seeking freedom."[36] Seeking freedom, perhaps, but what they got were months under the close watch of federal agents and military police.

A number of vocal Mariel migrants in the detention centers appeared to embrace U.S. exceptionalism, whether because they were grateful for the opportunity to get out of Cuba and sincerely believed the myths they heard, because they understood the potential benefits of playing along, or some combination of the two. "American Ways" columnist Jorge Frometa probably felt genuine warmth for the Red Cross employees who got to know Mariel migrants, sought out sponsors for them, and worked for the "relief of their pains" and the "solution of their problems." He may very well have been touched by the "friendliness of the American people" he met.[37] But the stakes of collaboration were high for Frometa. The fact that he was still in Fort Indiantown Gap at the end of July suggests that either he had no family members in the U.S. or the relatives he did have were unwilling to sponsor him. He must have understood that the voluntary agencies in charge of resettling Cubans had an easier time finding sponsors for people who worked closely with them, who expressed gratitude, and who encouraged others to do the same. VOLAGs passed along such information to sponsors, many of whom were wary of taking in "troublemakers" from the detention centers.

Those Mariel migrants who remained in Indiantown Gap when the detention center closed in October probably saw the writing on the wall. Some undoubtedly recognized the strategic advantage of being one of the "good Cubans," to use the words of General

---

[36] *La Libertad,* Edición Especial, July 4, 1980.

[37] *La Libertad* III, no. 13, July 18, 1980; *La Libertad* III, no. 17, July 24, 1980, Folder "La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80," Box 36, CHTF.

Brookshire.[38] Ramón Jiménez wrote in *La Libertad* to bid a fond farewell to "the holy and sacred land of Freedom City" and asked that God bless all "the people who lived and worked there." Rafael Rojas Rodriguez went one step further in his note to the "Generous People of the United States of America" by vowing to "fight communism in any part of the world." It is entirely plausible that Rodriguez's experiences in Cuba engendered in him an ardent anti-communism. Given that he directed his message specifically "to the press," however, it is clear that he aimed to influence public perceptions of Cubans like him who remained in detention centers. Rodriguez's words probably traveled no farther than the perimeter of Fort Indiantown Gap, but his efforts to reach a broad audience made sense, as people in the U.S. were increasingly skeptical that anybody left in the "camps" was worth sponsoring.[39]

Frustration and Resistance All Around

The urgency of attempts by administrators to prove the benevolence and greatness of the United States, and the efforts of some Cubans to reinforce this characterization, may have reflected the severe tensions in and around the military bases where Mariel migrants were detained. The bizarre display put on by Mac McCarty, the lone Klansman who ran at Cubans as they arrived in Arkansas, was just one of many protests surrounding the Carter administration's makeshift detention centers. Although a dozen more members of the Ku Klux Klan demonstrated outside Fort Chaffee several weeks later, white supremacist extremists were not the only people opposed to hosting the new arrivals near their communities.[40] Residents of Port Deposit, Maryland, were extremely unhappy to learn that the federal government was considering using the abandoned Bainbridge Naval Training Station in their small town to hold Cubans they thought to be "criminals" and "sickly." A group of men in the Port Deposit bar remarked to a reporter that President Carter might make better use of the Cubans from Mariel by putting them to work on his peanut farm in Plains, Georgia. That, or the president could send them to Three Mile Island, where authorities were still dealing with the partial nuclear melt down that occurred there a year earlier. The Carter administration ultimately passed on the Maryland location, citing extensive renovation costs, but the public outcry did not help the cause of the elected officials who supported the proposal.[41]

---

[38] *La Libertad* III, no. 12, July 17, 1980, Folder "La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80," Box 36, CHTF.

[39] *La Libertad* VI, no. 8, October 10, 1980, Folder "La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80," Box 36, CHTF.

[40] Herbert Denton, "17 Refugees Jailed After Melee at Florida Base," *Washington Post*, May 26, 1980.

Pennsylvanians expressed similar fears about the criminality of the Cubans who were headed to Fort Indiantown Gap. Area residents also worried about the economic impact the new arrivals might have on the area. With the country sinking deeper into recession, many people felt similarly to Caroline Dubbs, a waitress at a restaurant near Indiantown Gap, who worried that the Mariel migrants would only add to their burden. "We have enough to take care of here," she told the *Washington Post*. "Enough crime, enough unemployment."[42] Such sentiments quickly became clear to the FEMA coordinator at Indiantown Gap, who wrote to his boss to advise against resettling too many Mariel migrants in Pennsylvania because it could "antagonize the local citizenry."[43] In Fort Smith, Arkansas, and smaller towns near Fort Chaffee, major layoffs at local factories made residents particularly wary of potential competition in the labor market. Lenor Grandon, a 26-year-old mother who was out of work, expressed "compassion" for the Cubans from Mariel, but that did not stop her from picketing outside Fort Chaffee. She told the

---

[41] Dale Russakoff and Stephanie Mansfield, "Center for Cubans in Md. Reconsidered," *Washington Post*, May 13, 1980.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Memo, Robert J. Adamcik to Thomas Casey, May 19, 1980, Folder 6 "Gastón A. Fernández: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

New York Times, "I feel for them. But there's children here who need food, and men and women needing jobs, and Arkansas doesn't have them." Grandon's placard for the protest read, "What are they going to do now—relocate us Americans?" Local residents tended to be skeptical of government claims that the Cubans would be resettled somewhere else because several thousand of the people brought to Fort Chaffee from southeast Asia in 1975 had remained in the area. Terry Hughes, an unemployed 19-year-old who joined the pickets, lamented that "just about everywhere you go there's a Vietnamese working now."[44]

As much as Task Force staff and their Cuban allies attempted to use publications like *La Libertad* (Fort Indiantown Gap) and *La Vida Nueva* (Fort Chaffee) to celebrate U.S. hospitality and laud the freedoms that Mariel migrants would enjoy, these narratives did little to counter the swelling volatility in detention centers and the surrounding communities. Cubans who responded in less than congenial ways to their detention were much more likely than those who wrote for the base newspapers to make national headlines that summer. From May to October, there were at least a dozen instances of unrest at the detention centers. Reporters and bureaucrats typically described these events as "riots" or "disturbances." In most cases, these incidents began as protests or attempts to escape—by walking out, crashing gates, or scaling fences—and ended in fights between Cuban migrants and civilian police or military personnel. One of the first mass escape attempts occurred on May 24 at the detention center established adjacent to Eglin Air Force Base in northwestern Florida. About 200 detained Cubans chanted "*Libertad!*" as they tried to break open a gate and exit the fenced area that Eglin officials had deemed "Camp Liberty." According to the *Washington Post*, the Cubans threw bricks and rocks at the military police who confronted them.[45] A similar scene unfolded on a larger scale during the highly publicized June 1 riot at Fort Chaffee, except that Arkansas State Police ultimately responded to the rocks Cubans were throwing with shotguns and pistols, putting three Mariel migrants in the hospital with gunshot wounds.[46]

---

[44] William K. Stevens, "Pickets Add to Problems for Refugees in Arkansas, *New York Times*, May 11, 1980.

[45] Denton, "17 Refugees Jailed After Melee at Florida Base."

On August 5, there was a major confrontation at Fort Indiantown Gap between Cubans and security personnel, including hundreds of paratroopers from the 82d Airborne Division who were flown in from Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The unrest at the Gap began after a predawn search for weapons in one of barracks, during which some of the Cubans accused Federal Protective Service (FPS) agents of pushing a pregnant woman whom they alleged was trying to hide a knife. This led to several scuffles, which escalated when FPS agents returned later in the morning to arrest one of the men in the barracks. In the afternoon, a group of about 75 Cuban men walked out of their designated area of the base carrying banners that read, “Carter you are a liar.” About 400 military police confronted them in full riot gear. Sixteen members of the military and 42 Cubans were reported injured, yet State Department spokesperson Art Brill assured the press that there was no contact between police and the “rioters.” Given the injuries sustained on both sides, including a head wound that put a Cuban detainee in critical condition, Brill’s statement lacked credibility.[47] Further evidence of Brill’s disingenuousness emerged years later in response to a National Public Radio retrospective on the Mariel boatlift. Steven Page posted in the online comments section for the radio story to explain that he was one of the “young paratroopers” from the 82d Airborne sent by President Carter to put down the protest at Indiantown Gap. Page wrote, “We did what we had to and the refugees started behaving themselves." He continued, "I always thought it was ironic that I received a Humanitarian Service Medal for beating up re[f]ugees."[48]

---

[46] News Services, “Cubans Riot at Center in Arkansas.”

[47] “Information Paper,” August 5, 1980, Folder “Camps-Indiantown Gap,” Box 1, CHTF; Joyce Wadler and Alexandra Korry, “Cuban Refugee Camp Is Quiet After Rioting That Injured 58,” *Washington Post*, August 7, 1980.

There were similar protests, escape attempts, and conflicts at other detention centers in subsequent months. When hundreds of Cuban tore down the fence surrounding a secured all-male area at Fort McCoy in early September, a State Department spokesperson claimed that the people involved were concerned about a "lack of sponsorship."[49] This rationale for unrest was cited in most news coverage of these incidents, but journalists did not always capture fully the frustration, fear, and uncertainty generated throughout the process of 'digesting' the Cubans living in makeshift detention centers. FEMA attributed the late-May demonstration at Eglin to processing delays, a dearth of available flights out of the area for people who had been cleared for release, insufficient food for adults, and a lack of special meals for children.[50] A U.S. Park Police chief reported that the "riot" (which he put in quotation marks) at Eglin reflected the need for an alternative security plan that would bring in "people with sensitivity and compassion in dealing with the refugees." Evidently the military personnel who had been running the detention center lacked those traits.[51] Even Cubans who had family in the U.S. faced lengthy delays. The unrest at Fort Eglin and Fort Chaffee occurred as more and more relatives began showing up at the bases, only to face long waiting periods before they could reunite with their family members. On May 27, FEMA reported an "intolerable" situation at Eglin, where 5,165 people already cleared for resettlement remained locked inside the city of tents.[52] Indeed, FEMA officials understood that indefinite detention led to “inevitable boredom and frustration” and that the growing number of detained Cubans with relatives waiting for them literally on the other side of the fence was a potential powder keg. The agency was striving to find ways to expedite the resettlement process just as tensions in Fort Chaffee gave way to the mass escape attempt and violent conflict between police and Mariel migrants on June 1.[53]

---

[48] Neal Conan, "Marielitos' Stories, 30 Years After the Boatlift," *Talk of the Nation*, NPR, July 20, 2010, accessed January 26, 2016, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128646441.

[49] Associated Press, "MPs Repel Charge of Cuban Refugees," *Atlanta Constitution,* September 9, 1980.

[50] "FCO Report," May 25, 1980, Folder 6 "Gastón A. Fernández: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[51] "FCO Report," May 26, 1980, Folder 6 "Gastón A. Fernández: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[52] "FCO Notes," May 27, 1980, Folder 6 "Gastón A. Fernández: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

Marcos Cerices Rodriguez was one of the Cubans with family in the U.S. who faced long delays in Fort Chaffee. It took three weeks for him to get a formal health screening and an interview with the INS and FBI, in which agents grilled him about the two years he spent in La Cabaña Prison in Havana for embezzlement and allegedly using $60,000 for “anti-government purposes.” Rodriguez denied those charges. The INS and FBI interviewers asked him if he was a member of the Communist Party, another revolutionary organization, or any counter-revolutionary group. He told them that he was not. With his security and health clearances in hand a week later, he was assigned to a case worker from the United States Catholic Conference (USCC). Despite the eagerness of his relatives in New Jersey to sponsor him, an unspecified delay forced him to wait in Fort Chaffee until further notice. Rodriguez said he did not participate in the unrest on June 1 because he believed it was not “right” for Cubans to “strike” (the *Washington Post* inserted the word “riot” in brackets next to his description).[54] Whether or not they thought striking was “right,” most observers could understand why detained Mariel migrants were frustrated.

Delays continued and resentment simmered throughout the summer. Francisco Serrano, a Public Health Service official sent with a “Crisis Intervention Team” to Fort McCoy at the end of

---

[53] “FCO Notes,” May 30, 1980, Folder 6 “Gastón A. Fernández: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, 1980,” Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.
[54] Warren Brown, “Red Tape Can Entangle Even Cubans Who Pass the Tests,” *Washington Post*, June 5, 1980.

July, found that most Cubans "expected to leave the center almost at once, because the bureaucratic methodology that was designed was not explained to them clearly enough." He worried that there was "no standard or average time estimate"—resettlement took anywhere from one day to fifty days, and that was for people with relatives or friends to sponsor them. Mariel migrants who did not have willing sponsors often spent much longer periods in detention centers. Serrano also observed that much of the information shared with Cubans at Fort McCoy was insufficiently translated. Overall, his assessment was bleak. "Bureaucratic red tape is hard to comprehend to the average U.S. citizen," he reported after his trip to McCoy, "to the adult Cuban refugee it is a bigger problem because of the language barrier; to the Cuban unescorted minors it constitutes an unsurmountable nightmare."[55]

All Around Crackdown

Many Cuban-Haitian Task Force administrators recognized that most of the demonstrations did not begin as "riots." After hundreds of detained Cubans ran out of the detention area at Fort Chaffee in late May, FEMA spokesperson Bill McAda likened the event to a college "panty raid," a carnivalesque moment in which the Cubans who left the base did not intend to commit acts of violence but were, in fact, "laughing and having a big time." Even so, the event triggered a response from Governor Bill Clinton, in which he called on federal authorities to crack down on Cubans at the base.[56] Clinton's response, and the subsequent calls for heightened security and harsh discipline revealed the true purpose of the "resettlement camps." As much as there were concerted efforts on the part of Carter's bureaucracy and various voluntary agencies to improve life in the detention centers, ultimately these were carceral spaces where control was the primary objective. Disciplinary power was organized at the state level and exercised through punitive practices of isolation and incarceration. Power worked in less obvious ways, as well, as administrators and some of the Cubans themselves sought to coerce the detention center populations into behaving according to established rules and desired norms.

---

[55] Memo, Francisco S. Serrano to Maria Agostini, July 29, 1980, Folder "Fort McCoy [1]," Box 4, CHTF.

[56] Associated Press, "Better Security For Camp Asked As Refugees Flee," *New York Times,* May 28, 1980.

From the beginning, keeping Mariel migrants inside designated detention areas was a central concern for administrators. Although a FEMA administrator at Fort Indiantown Gap expressed his desire to "preserve peace and tranquility on the base without the image of a concentration camp environment," the INS began running a jail it called the Delta House Detention Center almost immediately after Cubans arrived at the Pennsylvania base.[57] Similar facilities, known as "stockades," were used to isolate detained Mariel migrants who were considered threats to security. In the case of Delta House, INS officials maintained complete discretion over who would be sent to the jail and for how long. There were not consistent guidelines to govern that process until the end of August, at which point a review board of external agencies was established for Delta House. Even then, the INS maintained ultimate authority over decisions about jailing Cubans inside Indiantown Gap.[58]

Throughout the detention and resettlement process, the emphasis was on control. Like Bill Clinton and his fellow elected officials in Arkansas, politicians in Pennsylvania pushed for strict security and firm punishment when it came to the Cuban people detained in their state. U.S. Representative Allen E. Ertel visited Indiantown Gap three times in May to assess the level of security at the "camp" and to express his interest in getting the Cubans sponsored out of Pennsylvania as soon as possible.[59] As the number of escapes and attempted escapes grew over the course of the summer, and as many Mariel migrants got released to sponsors, authorities sought to constrict the physical space available to Cubans in the detention centers. At Fort Chaffee, the Task Force instituted "Operation Cleavage" in early July, cutting in half the area where Cubans were held. Families, single men, and single women were segregated within the smaller space.[60] Such measures were intended to improve the ability of guards to surveil and police detention areas. Unlike at the other bases, the detention center at Indiantown Gap was not surrounded by fences. Instead, military police patrolled the perimeter and FPS guards policed the interior to prevent Cubans from leaving, which became a point of contention when Representative Ertel made an unannounced visit to the base and witnessed many of the security personnel slacking. He even discovered a pair of FPS officers asleep in their patrol car. The director for the Cuban-Haitian Task Force at the time, N.G.W. Thorne, responded to Ertel's concerns by assuring him that security patrols had been increased and additional lighting was being installed around the perimeter to increase visibility. He also shared plans to "consolidate the Cuban alien population into a smaller area thus reducing the perimeter and making it easier to patrol" and to "segregate younger males in an area enclosed by fencing."[61] Task Force administrators tried to normalize these carceral environments. Susan Goodling, a writer for *La Libertad*, claimed that all communities need police. "Here at Freedom City," she wrote, "the Military Police are providing this service." Goodling went on to list the various companies of MPs stationed at Fort Indiantown Gap and urged Cubans to cooperate with them.[62]

---

[57] Memo, Adamcik to Casey, May 19, 1980.

[58] Memo, Roger Adams to Chris Holmes, September 12, 1980, Folder "Camps-Indiantown Gap," Box 1, CHTF; Memo, Roger Adams to Charles Jarvis, September 19, 1980, Folder "Camps-Indiantown Gap," Box 1, CHTF.

[59] Memo, Robert J. Adamcik to Thomas Casey, May 25, 1980, Folder 6 "Gastón A. Fernández: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

---

[60] Memo, William H. Traugh to Tom Casey, July 1, 1980, Folder 3 "Gastón A. Fernández: Security Reports and Memoranda, 1980," Box 2, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC; Memo, George Putnam to Roger Winter, July 14, 1980, Folder "Fort Chaffee [1], Box 4, CHTF.

[61] Letter, Allen E. Ertel to Grail Brookshire, July 18, 1980, Folder "Camps-Indiantown Gap," Box 1, CHTF; Letter, N.G.W. Thorne to Allen E. Ertel, July 25, 1980, Folder "Camps-Indiantown Gap," Box 1, CHTF.

[62] *La Libertad* III, no. 9, July 14, 1980, Folder "La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80," Box 36, CHTF.

Of course, not everyone detained in "Freedom City" consented to this request. In July, a group of Cubans left the base and were caught robbing a hardware store in the nearby town of Ono. Five of them were sent to the Lebanon County jail. One of them had his bond set at $1 million; the other four were held on $250,000 bonds. General Brookshire, the commander at Indiantown Gap, addressed the burglary in the next day's edition of *La Libertad.* He warned other Mariel migrants detained at the base that such actions would "destroy the reputation of all good Cubans and will make it more difficult to find sponsors for all Cubans that still need to be resettled." Brookshire beseeched Cubans at Indiantown Gap to help "control these individuals that bring disgrace upon the rest of the Cuban population" and ordered them to report to their Area Commanders with any information they had regarding illicit or illegal activity.[63]

Incidents like the burglary at the hardware store made residents of towns surrounding Indiantown Gap begin to feel that the government had failed to establish complete control over Cubans detained at the base. Repeated escapes from the detention center and the protests and violence of August 5 all pointed to government incompetence. Fort Indiantown Gap was technically the property of the State of Pennsylvania—the U.S. Army leased the site—and there was a dispute over whether federal or local law enforcement authorities ought to bear responsibility for prosecuting Cubans who committed crimes on base and in the surrounding towns. Some local residents sought to take matters into their own hands and called for the formation of a vigilante police force with the authority to shoot on sight any Cuban suspected of leaving the detention center. The Union Township Board of Supervisors ultimately decided to table the idea and to keep it as an option for possible future action.[64] The Township of Clarion filed suit against the Carter administration to force the government to erect a fence around the entire perimeter of the Cuban area at Indiantown Gap. The Carter administration avoided the expensive construction project by extending its timeline for response until the detention center was closed in mid-October.[65] Still, the message from Pennsylvanians was clear: they would literally be up in arms if the Carter administration did not effectively confine and control its Cuban detainees. Residents near Indiantown Gap were not unique in this. Arkansans had already shown that they were not opposed to firing on Mariel migrants who left Fort Chaffee. The fears of Wisconsin residents near Fort McCoy eventually led the Cuban-Haitian Task Force to install rotary phones on the rural lands surrounding the base so that citizens could report sightings of escaped Cubans to the INS.[66]

---

[63] *La Libertad* III, no. 12, July 17, 1980.

[64] Ben A. Franklin, "Pennsylvania Jurisdiction Snarl Adds to Refugee Crisis," *New York Times*, August 8, 1980.

While federal authorities struggled to confine Cubans to the ad hoc detention centers established after the boatlift, they also found allies on the inside. A list of 15 "*Reglas de Comportamiento"* ("Rules of Behavior") for Cubans at Fort McCoy mandated that Cubans keep their identification cards with them at all times, prohibited consuming food outside of the dining halls and drinking alcohol, and warned that "*exhibirse en forma indecente*" (acting in an indecent manner) would lead to time in one of the makeshift jails within the base or imprisonment in a federal correctional institution. The rules also directed Cubans in McCoy to go to their "*líder de barraca*" (barracks chief) when they had problems.[67] It is unclear how these leaders were designated, but they made up part of an internal hierarchy within the detention center. A structure of internal leadership developed in Fort Indiantown Gap, as well. "*Alcaldes cubanos*" (Cuban mayors) gained positions of authority within each section of the camp and acted as intermediaries and representatives for the people in their areas. The mayors met regularly with military and civilian authorities.[68]

---

[65] Memo, Frank Moss and Roger Adams to Gene Malmborg, September 8, 1980, Folder "Camps-Indiantown Gap," Box 1, CHTF.

[66] Memo, Thomas C. Irvin to Nick Nicols, September 11, 1980, Folder "Fort McCoy [1], Box 4, CHTF.

[67] "Reglas de Comportamiento," n.d., Folder "Camp Consolidation [3]," Box 1, CHTF.

It was not necessary for Cubans to occupy recognized positions of authority to collaborate with administrative efforts to maintain order and discipline. There were other ways to comply, and to push for the compliance of others. Each incidence of unrest in the detention centers was thought to reinforce perceptions that the people living in those spaces were dangerous, unruly, and “undesirable.” Such perceptions decreased the likelihood of sponsorship. The incentive to condemn those who escaped, broke rules, or protested their confinement helped divide detention center populations. Mariel migrants who wanted to put their heads down and find sponsors sought to distance themselves from the people involved in escape attempts and “riots.” After the June 1 unrest at Fort Chaffee, Eduardo Garcia admitted to reporters that he and the other Cubans at Fort Indiantown Gap were frustrated by processing delays and a lack of communication with authorities. Yet he was quick to qualify his remarks by adding, “We are not like some of those Cubans who rioted in Fort Chaffee.”[69] The Gap ultimately had its fair share of conflicts, which made Garcia’s claim to superiority seem rather frail.

Even so, some of the Cubans detained at Indiantown Gap sought to portray themselves as being above the fray. Alfredo Lopez Lopez wrote an open letter in *La Libertad* to implore his fellow Cubans to unite “*contra lo mal hecho*” (against wrongdoing). He condemned the “*maleantes que al parecer se empeña en desprestigiarnos*” (troublemakers who seem to be intent on defaming us) because their actions threatened to ruin the reputation of people from Mariel and make it harder to get out of the detention center. He called on Cubans at the Gap to be *“disciplinados*” (disciplined) and demonstrate their moral worth in order to change the negative opinion that was so evident in the U.S. press.[70] A week later, after thirteen Cubans escaped one of the jails set up within the larger detention area, *La Libertad* staff printed a similar message, asking the people at Indiantown Gap to "help control these troublemakers, in order to preserve your reputation and to preserve the continual influx of new outside sponsors."[71] Thus, after violence broke out between Mariel migrants and military police in Fort Indiantown Gap several days later, there was a group of Cubans poised to assure reporters that they did not condone the actions of their compatriots. Enriqueta Sabedra, who was about to the get out of the detention center and move to Miami, told the *Washington Post,* "The Army protects our lives. We like it." Surely Sabedra's comment was sincere, but it reinforced the Carter administration's message that the people responsible for moments of disorder should be dealt with harshly, as they were the few true "undesirables."[72]

---

[68] *La Libertad* IV, no 1, August 1, 1980.

[69] Ward Sinclair, “Anxiety Plagues Hearts and Souls of Cuban Refugees, *Washington Post*, June 8, 1980.

In addition to the everyday forms of power exercised by Cubans to shame or cajole their compatriots into behaving in particular ways, a more forceful means of control and coercion emerged in the form of quasi-official internal police units. Many of the Cuban men who made up these security forces had military training, and administrators gave formal recognition to the groups that formed in Fort Indiantown Gap and Fort McCoy. At Indiantown Gap, the Cuban police received special identification cards and worked under a "bilingual security coordinator" assigned to advise them. Ultimately, the Cuban-Haitian Task Force formalized the status of the internal police unit at the Gap by dubbing it the Cuban Auxiliary Security Force (CASF), instituting screening and supervision procedures, and requiring a uniform consisting of a "white shirt, dark trousers and white safety hat." The CASF members were not armed and did not receive wages, but they did enjoy the "fringe benefits" of extra cigarettes and flexible curfews. The CASF helped break up fights and its members were tasked with helping to protect "persons and property." Administrators hoped that the deputized Cubans would assist law enforcement agencies in guarding gates and maintaining orderly lines for food and clothing distribution, and that they would provide information regarding potential demonstrations, disruptions, or escape attempts.[73]

---

[70] *La Libertad* III, no. 16, July 23, 1980, Folder "La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80," Box 36, CHTF. Some translations modified by the author to improve accuracy.

[71] *La Libertad* III, no 22, July 31, 1980, Folder "La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80," Box 36, CHTF.

[72] Wadler and Korry, "Cuban Refugee Camp is Quiet After Rioting that Injured 58."

The Cuban-Haitian Task Force dedicated resources to supervising the CASF, in part, because officials wanted to limit the group's autonomy, even as they continued to rely on the Cuban police unit to oversee daily activities around the base. The internal security force operating at Fort McCoy had demonstrated to administrators that ceding too much power posed risks. In early September, *TIME* magazine published a widely read article entitled "Camp of Fear In Wisconsin" in which the author described a rogue Cuban security force that operated like a gang. Its members armed themselves with "broom handles, tree limbs and even a few billy clubs and knives" and used these weapons to "rob and terrorize other refugees."[74] Some of the story's details were inaccurate, but a Task Force review of the situation indicated that there was a group inside Fort McCoy known as the "Warhawks," which infiltrated the Cuban security force inside the base. According to the *TIME* article, they derived their name from the mascot of the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater. The school had donated purple windbreakers to Fort McCoy, which the group adopted as a sort of uniform. The Warhawks abused the power they gained from their positions within the internal police unit and fought with the members of a rival

---

[73] *La Libertad* IV, no 1, August 1, 1980; Letter, Thorne to Ertel, July 25, 1980; Memo, Harry T. Johnson to All Security Agency Representatives and All Task Force Elements, September 1, 1980, Folder "Camps-Indiantown Gap," Box 1, CHTF; Memo, Adams to Holmes, September 12, 1980.
[74] "Camp of Fear in Wisconsin," *Time*, September 8, 1980.

"gang" at Fort McCoy, allegedly finding opportunities to settle some disputes that originated in Cuba.[75] While the tone of the *TIME* article was sensational and it tapped into the prejudices and fears of many readers by highlighting "repeated reports of homosexual and heterosexual rape," the account was clearly based in some truth. Cuban-Haitian Task Force leaders had moved to address reports of brutality at Fort McCoy weeks before the article was printed, and they admitted the need to protect Cubans—particularly unaccompanied minors—from other Cubans detained at the base. In the end, though, the Cuban-Haitian Task Force depended on the internal "Cuban leadership" that had developed at Fort McCoy to disband the Warhawks.[76]

The INS eventually sent nine of the fourteen people it identified as Warhawks to penal institutions outside of the base.[77] Indeed, incarceration became the default response when individuals or groups threatened the fragile order established in detention centers. Seventeen Cubans from Fort Eglin were jailed at the end of May for participating in a mass escape attempt and then throwing rocks at police, an event the *Washington Post* referred to as a "melee."[78] By May 30, the INS had sent 606 Mariel migrants to federal prisons.[79] In early June, the INS sent inspectors to investigate 116 of the "dissidents" involved in the unrest Fort Chaffee. Over half of them were sent to the INS detention center in El Paso, Texas, where they awaited exclusion hearings with Immigration Judges. [80] In July, eight of thirteen Mariel migrants who escaped a jail set up inside Fort Indiantown Gap were sent to a federal prison and quickly marked for deportation.[81] Since the Cuban government refused to accept their return, they faced indefinite incarceration. By the end of September, there were over 1,700 people from Mariel locked up in INS or BOP penal institutions.[82] Cubans incarcerated for alleged misbehavior in the "resettlement camps" accounted for at least half of this group.[83]

---

[75] "Ginsberg's Statement," September 1980, Folder "Fort McCoy [1]," Box 4, CHTF.
[76] Memo, Roger C. Adams to Ben Flannagan, August 22, 1980, Folder "Camps-Indiantown Gap," Box 1, CHTF; Memo, Christian R. Holmes to Tom Irvin, August 17, 1980, Folder "Fort McCoy [1]," Box 4, CHTF; Memo, Christian R. Holmes to Victor Palmieri, August 26, 1980, Folder "Fort McCoy [1]," Box 4, CHTF.
[77] Letter, Andrew J. Carmichael, Jr. to Victor Palmieri, September 2, 1980, Folder "Fort McCoy [1]," Box 4, CHTF.
[78] Denton, "17 Refugees Jailed After Melee at Florida Base."
[79] "FCO Notes," May 30, 1980.
[80] "FCO Notes," June 6, 1980, Folder 6 "Gastón A. Fernández: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC; Babcock, "U.S. to Bar Cuban Criminals, Rioters at Fort Chaffee."

It is essential to remain critical of the definitions the government used for criminal activity, including crimes defined as violent, but it is equally important to recognize that some people in the detention centers did terrible things to others confined to those spaces. Without a doubt, some Cubans from Mariel posed real threats to the safety of their fellow migrants. At one point, authorities found a .22 caliber pistol in one of the Cuban tents at Fort Eglin. Whether the Cuban in possession of the gun kept it for self-defense or intended to use it proactively, it represented the possibility of bloodshed.[84] In July, two people detained at Fort Chaffee were found with stab wounds after an altercation, and a total of five stabbings were recorded over the course of the summer.[85] A fact finding commission set up by Wisconsin governor Lee Dreyfus confirmed reports of rapes and muggings at Fort McCoy, and Cuban-Haitian Task Force officials noted that unaccompanied minors were "banding together or attaching themselves to an adult" in order to protect themselves.[86] U.S. Marshals reported over 900 crimes at Fort McCoy by the end of August, about a third of which "involved violence."[87] Meanwhile, concerns about conditions in the detention center at Fort Indiantown Gap were sufficient to prompt an investigation by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.[88]

---

[81] *La Libertad* III, no 22, July 31, 1980.

[82] Memo, Barbara Lawson to Christian R. Holmes, September 26, 1980, Folder "Camp Consolidation [2]," Box 1, CHTF.

[83] This estimate is based on the numbers recorded in the FEMA memorandum "FCO Notes," May 30, 1980, which reported that as of that date 606 Cubans had been sent to federal prisons for alleged criminal actions in Cuba. The McCoy numbers are from the memo from Christian Holmes to Victor Palmieri on August 26. (See full citations above).

[84] "Memo For Record," June 18, 1980, Folder 5 "Gastón A. Fernández: Consolidation, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[85] Memo, Putnam to Winter, July 14, 1980; Memo, Donald E. Whitteaker to John Cannon, September 2, Folder 5 "Gastón A. Fernández: Consolidation, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[86] From Press Dispatches, "Wisconsin Asks for Fed Troops," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 4, 1980; Memo, Holmes to Palmieri, August 26, 1980.

[87] Memo, Thomas C. Irvin to Christian Holmes, September 2, 1980, Folder "Fort McCoy [1]," Box 4, CHTF.

In most of these cases, though, the communities surrounding the detention centers were unharmed. News stories about the detention centers contributed to public anxiety over the new Cuban migrants, but much of the language used by reporters misrepresented those conflicts. Even Cuban-Haitian Task Force officials acknowledged that media accounts had blown things out of proportion and that the word "riot" had been "misleading" when it came to some of what happened in detention centers.[89] Eugene Eidenberg, a close advisor to Jimmy Carter who led the White House oversight of the detention centers, later reflected that the June 1 "disturbance" at Fort Chaffee only "became a riot in the public mind" because of the way the national news media reported on it. He described the local reaction as "hysterical" and was critical of the state police for firing on a group of Cubans who "wandered off the base on a hot summer night…to stretch their legs."[90] The truth was that the people most in danger were the Cubans themselves. The carceral spaces created at Eglin, Chaffee, Indiantown Gap, and McCoy produced anxiety and frustration. Cramped communal living spaces created opportunities for abuse. Uncertainty about how long one would have to live in a restricted, heavily policed environment could lead to despair. For people already struggling with mental illness, life in the detention centers was itself a threat. On June 1, as news media around the nation focused on the Cubans throwing rocks at police outside Fort Chaffee, a man from Mariel killed himself at Fort McCoy.[91]

---

[88] Letter, Louis Nunez to Christian R. Holmes, August 28, 1980, Folder "Camps-Indiantown Gap," Box 1, CHTF.

[89] "Ginsberg's Statement," September 1980.

[90] "Gene and Bob's unrehearsed conversation," September 4, 1981, Folder 1 "Barbara Lawson: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Documents, 1980-1981," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC. A similar version of this conversation fragment is also cited in Shull, "'Nobody Wants These People.'"

[91] Memo, Nathan J. Stark to Jack Watson, June 2, 1980, Folder "Cuban Situation: Reports to the White House," Box 1, CHTF.

Conclusion

Suicide was not common in the detention centers, but desperation was. As one Task Force official put it, "These are scared people who do not trust government authorities, who are depressed and anxious about their situation."[92] Despite all the entertaining and assimilating the Task Force attempted, many of the Cubans who spent months in "Freedom City" (Fort Indiantown Gap), "Camp Liberty" (Fort Eglin), and the other detention centers could not help but feel disillusioned. For those who had been in prison on the island, these spaces must have felt uncomfortably familiar. *Washington Post* writer Juan Williams wrote that a sense of hopelessness set in among the Cubans who remained at Fort Indiantown in early October. He spoke with Hipolito Carmero, a 79-year-old man who said he was thrown in prison in Cuba for selling 25 leaves of homegrown tobacco to some friends. Carmero told Williams that he feared he would die in the prison, and he decided to join the Mariel boatlift when Cuban authorities offered him the option. But in Pennsylvania, Williams wrote, "Instead of dying in a Cuban jail he may die behind the barbed wire of an American refugee camp."[93] Even for people who got out of the detention centers, the United States frequently failed to deliver on its promise as a land of opportunity. Thousands of Mariel migrants ended up squatting or living on the streets after their sponsorships broke down. The people who remained in detention centers could count on regular meals and a roof over their heads, and some were grateful for the support of voluntary agencies and Task Force staff, but the general feeling among them was hardly optimistic.

As early as July, the Carter administration began making plans to consolidate the Mariel migrants who remained in the four large detention centers. On August 5, Eugene Eidenberg announced that Fort Chaffee in Arkansas would be the consolidation site. As the other detention centers prepared to close, some staff members took the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Mike Gamble, a member of the U.S. Army 16th Psychological Operations Company in charge of publishing the base newspaper, *La Libertad,* waxed nostalgic about the "little world" of people with the desire to be "free and to have control over their destiny" that had been "transplanted in the gentle countryside of Central Pennsylvania, U.S.A." Gamble also offered some advice and encouragement to the people still living in the militarized detention center. "We have no streets 'paved with gold' or quick solutions to our serious problems," he wrote. "What you will find is a country based on democratic principals [sic] which guarantees our personal rights by law. You will have the opportunity to work towards your personal goals and to achieve them."[94] His words must have rung hollow among many of the people in that "little world." The only thing guaranteed them was an indeterminate number of additional months in a detention center located halfway across the country. For black and *mulato* Cubans, those months were likely to be many.

---

[92] Memo, Silvia Gonzalez to Charles Cain, September 22, 1980, Folder "Camp Consolidation [3]," Box 1, CHTF.
[93] Juan Williams, "The People Who Have Fled to Nothing," *Washington Post,* October 5, 1980.

---

[94] *La Libertad* IV, no 16, August 22, 1980, Folder "La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80," Box 36, CHTF.

CHAPTER 4

“TO THINK THAT SOME REFUGEES ARE BETTER THAN OTHER REFUGEES”

“Unhappy” does not even begin to convey the feelings of Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton when he learned that the Carter administration had decided to consolidate the last of the detained Mariel migrants at Fort Chaffee. Carter’s advisor Eugene Eidenberg broke the news to Clinton at the National Governors Association meeting in Denver. Several days later, Eidenberg told a group of officials gathered at Fort Chaffee that Clinton had “reiterated his opposition to the decision” when he learned of the consolidation plan.[1] According to multiple accounts, the conversation was more colorful than Eidenberg suggested. “You’re fucking me,” Clinton screamed. “How could you do this to me? I busted my ass for Carter. You guys are gonna get me beat. I’ve done everything I could for you guys. This is ridiculous. Carter’s too chicken-shit about it to tell me directly!”[2] Clinton felt betrayed because after the June 1 conflicts at Fort Chaffee, Eidenberg assured worried Arkansans that no more Cubans would be sent to the base. Senator David Pryor told the *Southwest Times Record* in Fort Smith that Carter had met with him and Senator Dale Bumpers in the Oval Office to promise them that no additional Mariel migrants would go to Arkansas. They believed Carter broke his word when he made the decision to consolidate at Chaffee and, like Clinton, they voiced their opposition loudly.[3]

---

[1] “Transcript of Eidenberg’s meeting and speech - Chaffee,” August 5, 1980, Folder “Fort Chaffee [1],” Box 4, CHTF.

[2] Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy, *The Presidents Club: Inside the World’s Most Exclusive Fraternity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 433; Also see Daniel C. Walsh, *An Air War with Cuba: The United States Radio Campaign against Castro* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011), 151, or Philippe R. Girard, *Clinton in Haiti: The 1994 U.S. Invasion of Haiti* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 60.

[3] Jim Stafford, “Arkansas Leaders Share ‘Outrage,’” *Southwest Times Record,* August 2, 1980**,** Folder “Fort Chaffee

Carter's staff categorically denied speculation that the President's choice was politically motivated—Arkansas had fewer electoral votes than Wisconsin, Florida, and Pennsylvania—and insisted that the decision came after considering over 100 alternative sites. Fort Chaffee was already equipped to house thousands of people, and officials claimed that its relatively mild weather made it a more economical option than Fort McCoy or Fort Indiantown Gap, both of which would have required costly investments in winterization. The White House also blamed the weather for its choice not to use Fort Eglin Air Force Base as a consolidation site. Hurricane season was approaching in the Caribbean and a big storm was headed Florida's way.[4] What Eugene Eidenberg and others from the Carter administration did not admit publicly was that the detention center at Fort Eglin was located on fairgrounds owned by a Democratic National Committee member and that, since early June, local leaders and U.S. Representative Earl Hutto had been putting pressure on Cuban-Haitian Task Force administrators to remove the Cubans detained there. The imminent arrival of the county fair was at least as significant as the possible hurricane trajectory when it came to their decision to accelerate the transfer of Mariel migrants from Fort Eglin to Fort Chaffee in August.[5] Carter officials attributed the move to the weather, but the Eglin example lends credence to the claim that electoral politics influenced the choice to send the remaining detained Cubans to Arkansas. Either way, most people who lived near Chaffee were not pleased to have to continue playing host to arrivals from Mariel.

Arkansans specified that their concern was not just that more Cubans were coming but that they anticipated receiving a particularly unsavory group. The mayor of Barling, Eddie Hodges, expressed uneasiness about the "type of people" the federal government would bring to

---

[1]," Box 4, CHTF.

[4] "Transcript of Eidenberg's meeting and speech - Chaffee," August 5, 1980.

[5] Memo, Scott L. Hardman to Christian R. Holmes, August 3, 1980, Folder "Camp Consolidation [1]," Box 1, CHTF.

the Army base just down the road from his town. Mayor Gene Beil of Van Buren worried that the plan to bring "hard-to-place Cubans" could turn into a "forever type of thing," in which Fort Chaffee would become a permanent home for the least desirable of the Mariel migrants.[6] When Eugene Eidenberg went to Arkansas to discuss consolidation plans, he addressed the dominant view that the "hard to resettle people" were "criminals" or "difficult people socially." He explained, "A lot of them are hard to resettle because they are in the 20's or in their 30's and they are unattached. It's a lot easier to resettle a child who has an Aunt or Uncle in this country than it is to resettle a 20-year old man who has no family. A 25 year old man may be a perfectly legitimate human being, not wanted by the law, it's just hard to find a sponsor for that individual."[7] But earlier representations of people from Mariel had stuck—many still saw them as "undesirables" that Fidel Castro "dumped on the United States."[8] By continually representing the Cubans inside the detention centers in this way, journalists and other public observers reproduced the fears that stalled resettlement efforts. They thus helped fulfill their own prophecy that the people consolidated at Fort Chaffee would "never be viably sponsorable."[9]

The burden of these representations was not shared equally. Black and *mulato* Cubans, who made up about half of the group initially sent to detention centers, accounted for an ever-more disproportionate percentage of the "camp" populations over the course of the next year. By December, it was obvious that most of the Cubans still in Fort Chaffee had darker skin. Paul Heath Hoeffel wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* that "thousands of young, unskilled and predominantly black single men" were living at Fort Chaffee, where conditions were "not unlike those at the internment camps in which the United States held many Japanese-Americans during World War II."[10] Bad press from the detention centers hit black and *mulato* men especially hard. Stories of "riots" and images of young black men throwing rocks at police fit neatly into existing constructions of black youth in the United States. The mid-sixties protests, uprisings, and violence in Watts and Harlem were not so far back in public memory that they could not be recalled with relative ease in 1980.

---

[6] Stafford, "Arkansas Leaders Share 'Outrage.'"

[7] "Transcript of Eidenberg's meeting and speech - Chaffee," August 5, 1980. (Typographic errors in original).

[8] Gazette Press Services, "Officials Verify Use of Chaffee," *Arkansas Gazette*, August 3, 1980, Folder "Fort Chaffee [1]," Box 4, CHTF.

[9] "Transcript of Eidenberg's meeting and speech - Chaffee," August 5, 1980.

Chapter 2 demonstrated how blackness and undesirability became intertwined through institutional and representational forces in both Cuba and the United States. Chapter 3 examined the ways in which outright punitive and ostensibly humanitarian impulses combined to do work in the Carter administration's detention centers, transforming those who remained from "undesirable" to "unsponsorable." Race was muted in records throughout most of this process but, as this chapter will demonstrate, color-blind discourses and management approaches in the face of mounting evidence that race mattered in the detention centers only contributed further to racially disparate consequences. In reality, administrators, security personnel, voluntary agency staff, and potential sponsors all saw 'color' quite clearly. The incongruities between bureaucratic and human sightlines thus weighed heavily on the lives of black and *mulato* Cubans trying to find a home.

Writing Race into the Record

As with the media accounts and ad hoc migration policies surrounding the arrival of the Mariel migrants, the official records kept throughout the summer did not make racial distinctions among Cubans. Race was conspicuously absent from countless reports filed on the "sociodemographics" of the new arrivals. Bureaucrats obsessively counted the number of new migrants, the number of sponsorships achieved and where they were located, and how many people were living in "resettlement camps" and INS prisons. Officials meticulously typed statistics on the age, sex, occupational background, and health of people from Mariel. But race rarely appeared in the long stream of documents produced by the Task Force and affiliated agencies from April to August.[11] There were moments, however, when race became visible. For instance, the photograph beneath a *New York Times* story about the August 5 conflict between Cubans and military police in Fort Indiantown Gap depicted a group of young black and *mulato* men holding makeshift weapons and throwing rocks.[12] Such images conveyed information about the blackness of the new migrants in a way that printed words almost never did.

---

[10] Paul Heath Hoeffel, "Fort Chaffee's Unwanted Cubans," *New York Times Magazine*, December 21, 1980.

None of this is to say that people from Mariel were not racialized. In fact, people in the U.S. openly lumped them into the category of "Latins," which was used to describe migrants from every Spanish-speaking nation in the Caribbean and just about every country in Central and South America. Sometimes referred to as "Hispanics," Latins were a racially undifferentiated group. The hundreds of thousands of Cubans who left after 1959 were joined in this category by tens of thousands of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans and millions of Mexicans who entered the United States in the 1970s.[13] The racial categories used in these countries meant little in most places around the U.S., and thus the idea of Cuban blackness generally was not legible north of the Straits of Florida. For the many black and *mulato* Mariel migrants locked in detention centers, there was no emotional speech from Shirley Chisholm and no outrage from the Congressional Black Caucus as there had been for Haitians.[14] Most Cubans who entered the U.S. between 1959 and 1980 had lighter skin and, while the economic status of many of them afforded them certain privileges, they still were racialized as Latins. Their whiteness not seen as being the same as the whiteness of “Anglos” from the United States. The editors of the *Arkansas Gazette* found the Latin category useful for downplaying unrest in the detention centers during the summer. In contrast with their colleagues from other newspapers, the *Gazette* editors attempted to defuse some of the tensions surrounding the Fort Chaffee consolidation decision. The editors wrote, “There have been a few incidents, and all manner of sinister reports emerging from the camp, but Latins are dramatic folks, prone to hyperbole, as we all know.”[15]

---

[11] For an example of such reports, see Memo, Frederick M. Bohen to Eugene Eidenberg, November 6, 1980, Folder "Data Processing," Box 2, CHTF.

[12] United Press International, "Dozens Hurt in Series Of Protests by Cubans In Pennsylvania Camp," *New York Times*, August 6, 1980.

[13] Sarah J. Mahler and Dusan Ugrina, "Central America: Crossroads of the Americas," Migration Policy Institute, April 1, 2006, accessed April 15, 2016, http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-america-crossroads-americas; Jeffrey S. Passel, D'Vera Cohn and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera,"II. Migration Between the U.S. and Mexico," Pew Research Center, April 23, 2012, accessed April 15, 2016, http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/04/23/ii-migration-between-the-u-s-and-mexico/.

Despite what “we all know,” the essentialist Latin construct had some seams, and the longer Mariel migrants were in detention centers, the more evident ruptures became. As the second chapter demonstrated, while the language of criminality usually was the explicit vehicle for identifying which migrants were “desirable” or “undesirable,” race was threaded throughout this process of differentiation. When observers did point to a corporeal marker to denote a person as a criminal, they almost never pointed directly to skin color. One of the early myths of Mariel was that people in Cuban prisons got tattoos based on their crimes—a certain number of dots in a particular place on the hand might indicate that a person had committed murder, for example. The mayor of Fort Smith, Arkansas, Jack Freeze, linked criminality to body art, no doubt drawing on the rumors that emerged during INS processing. “People here decided they didn’t want the Cubans before they saw them,” Freeze said. "The press had already said they were bad.

---

[14] Charles R. Babcock, “Rep. Chisholm Asks Equity for Haiti’s Black Refugees,” *Washington Post*, June 18, 1980, Folder “Reading File,” Box 16, CHTF.

[15] Editorial, “The Excitement Over Chaffee,” *Arkansas Gazette,* August 4, 1980, Folder “Fort Chaffee [1],” Box 4, CHTF.

I went out there and saw a lot of them covered with tattoos. I knew they couldn't be productive. There might be a Desi Arnaz or two out there, but mostly they were going to be killing one another."[16] Although Freeze did not mention race, his allusion to the conga-drumming, Cuban-born co-star of *I Love Lucy* was telling. Whether or not it was intentional, his choice to contrast the newcomers from Mariel with Arnaz—a beloved and *white* Cuban celebrity—communicated a racial message that reinforced the images on the news and the scenes witnessed by people around Fort Chaffee. Reflecting on his time at the base, former Red Cross employee Eduardo Gamarra surmised that people in northwest Arkansas had no concept of what Cubans might look like prior to the arrival of the first group of Mariel migrants in June, but seeing the newcomers did nothing to ease their fears. Gamarra sensed an air of incredulity among local residents when they saw that, "[o]n top of everything else, these people are *black*." That many of them were young and male also contributed to residents' fears, he said.[17]

The idea that a person could be "Latin" *and* "black" may have blown a few minds around the United States, but among Cubans themselves it was hardly a novel concept. Mariel migrants brought racial attitudes with them, which affected what happened within the detention centers in ways that U.S.-born Cuban-Haitian Task Force administrators were not likely to see. For instance, when Eduardo Gamarra went to work at Fort Chaffee on June 2, the day after the "riot," he asked a group of white Cubans about the events that had taken place. They responded by rubbing the back of their hands in a gesture that indicated *los negros* (black Cubans) were responsible for the unrest of the previous day.[18] Such casual accusations, frequently communicated in whispers and sometimes conveyed without words, were almost certainly taken into account during the initial processing of Mariel migrants. Often that was the only information available to the INS agents tasked with ruling whether or not a new migrant was “excludable” from entry. When INS investigators went to Fort Chaffee in early June, they likely relied on similar hearsay, which made the process of identifying the ringleaders and sending them to prisons in Texas fraught with potential for errors and abuses.

---

[16] James Conway, "Unwanted Immigrants: Cuban Prisoners in America," *The Atlantic* 247, no. 2, February 1981, p. 75.

[17] Gamarra, interview with the author.

[18] Ibid.

A large contingent of the INS security personnel who worked in Fort Chaffee were Chicanos or Mexican-Americans. Federal officials may have believed that assigning people they saw as Latins to the Cuban detention center would help facilitate a congenial environment, but if any affinity ever existed between these groups, it quickly wore thin. A number of the Mariel migrants told Gamarra that they “hated” this group of guards, whom they referred to as “*los mexicanos*” (the Mexicans). Apparently the feeling was mutual. Some Cubans suggested to Gamarra that the conflict on June 1 escalated, in part, because of those tensions.[19] The impaired vision of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force with respect to the way race operated within the so-called Latin community thus contributed to the already-volatile circumstances.

As the months went by, people with a more intimate knowledge of the racial dynamics of Cuba began subtly, if unintentionally, to address the racial composition of the detention centers. The established Cuban exiles and migrants who were enlisted by the Carter administration to help with the resettlement effort and run the detention centers were keenly aware of the blackness of many of the Mariel migrants. Sergio Pereira, an assistant in the Dade County Manager’s office, became a special advisor to Carter’s U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs. Pereira visited Eglin, McCoy, and Indiantown Gap in preparation for the consolidation at Fort Chaffee and reported back to the Cuban-Haitian Task Force with a set of recommendations. “The persons remaining at the camps now are largely those without families or friends in the United States or those who have some sort of antisocial or behavioral or criminal history," Pereira wrote. "They need orientation and training before they can be released into the mainstream of our society." Pereira was correct, of course, that many of the people in the detention centers did not have family members in the United States. He also knew that, unlike him and the vast majority of the Cubans who were already living in the U.S., many of them were black and *mulato*. Pereira never stated that fact explicitly. Instead he made a comparison that would have evoked racial images for U.S. readers: "This group of people is no different from any group of inner-city hard-core unemployed, in fact they have begun to acquire the characteristics of despair and hopelessness, due to their months of confinement."[20]

---

[19] Ibid.

Of course, references to people from the "inner-city" were probably not sufficient in and of themselves to get Task Force administrators to pay attention to the racial demographics of the detention centers. In combination with images in the news and what officials witnessed in visits to the various sites, however, reports like Pereira's helped make the race of Mariel migrants slightly more legible to U.S.-born administrators. After months of memoranda with no mention of race whatsoever, as consolidation got underway leaders in the Carter administration began to incorporate some racial information into their communications. One of the first Task Force documents to include racial demographics was not even typed out—it was a set of handwritten notes that eventually got put in a file.[21] A September update sent to President Carter also included information about the race of Mariel migrants in detention centers, indicating that about half the remaining population was "black."[22]

---

[20] Memo, Sergio Pereira to Chris Holmes, August 20, 1980, Folder "Camp Consolidation [1]," Box 1, CHTF.

[21] Data summaries, September 1980, Folder "Character Profile," Box 20, CHTF.

[22] Memo, Eugene Eidenberg to Jimmy Carter, September 1980, Folder "Camp Consolidation [2]," Box 1, CHTF.

If that estimate was correct, then the racial demographics of the detention centers did not change much from the beginning of the summer to the end. In August, September, and October there was a major push to resettle as many Mariel migrants as possible to fulfill a White House promise not to hold more than 10,000 people in Fort Chaffee at any one time. The Carter administration made this commitment to appease local residents and Arkansas politicians like Bill Clinton who resisted the consolidation decision. To meet this goal, at least half of the Cubans remaining in the detention centers on August 1 had to be resettled.[23] It is difficult to find data to show how many of the people sponsored out of the detention centers during the rush to consolidate were white. What is clear, because the Cuban-Haitian Task Force continued to track the racial demographics of Fort Chaffee, is that the percentage of black and *mulato* Cubans grew rapidly between September and December. Within a few months of consolidation, the percentage of detained Mariel migrants classified as "black" rose from 50 to 75 percent.[24]

Human Rights and Tall Fences

During consolidation, White House officials continued to perform a balancing act between a message focused on security and human rights rhetoric. Eugene Eidenberg reiterated the latter point to officials at Fort Chaffee when he told them that "we have no choice as a nation but to cope with the problem as best we can in ways that are consistent with our humanitarian and democratic traditions."[25] Many administrators took this obligation to heart during consolidation. In Fort Indiantown Gap, as in the other detention centers, numerous memoranda circulated about the need to take the anxieties of the new migrants into account. They had been moved around a lot already, and Task Force workers stressed the need to prepare them for the transition in order to assuage their fears of being “shuffled around and forgotten.”[26] An information campaign was developed to reassure Cubans who were being transferred to Arkansas. A “Fact Sheet” presented to them when they arrived opened with the following line: “Welcome to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas! We hope that your stay with us will be both pleasant and brief.” Many of the Mariel migrants undoubtedly felt that their stay in detention centers already was much longer than they had anticipated. In any case, the document went on to explain that their records from the other bases were brought to Chaffee so that voluntary agencies could connect them with sponsors. The fact sheet included information about the local weather, the base newspaper, *La Vida Nueva*, the base radio station, KNJB, and various recreational activities. Although such information was intended to make Fort Chaffee feel more like a summer camp than a prison, the concluding paragraph of the fact sheet about the need to maintain a “pleasant camp atmosphere” and prevent “disturbances” reminded Cubans that they were entering a space where their behavior would be closely monitored.[27]

---

[23] "Press Statement On Consolidation At Fort Chaffee" (draft), August 1980, Folder "Camp Consolidation [1]," Box 1, CHTF; "Transcript of Eidenberg's meeting and speech-Chaffee," August 5, 1980.
[24] "Overview: Resettlement Camps, Chapter 2" (draft), September 25, 1981, Folder 1 "Barbara Lawson: Cuban-Haitian Task Force Documents, 1980-1981," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.
[25] "Transcript of Eidenberg's meeting and speech-Chaffee," August 5, 1980.

If such warnings did not suggest to the detained Mariel migrants that they were entering a carceral environment, the 8- to 10-feet-tall fence with its “double bayonet top” and concertina wire at the base served to make it abundantly clear. That fence, which was estimated to cost over $250,000, was a point of controversy within the Cuban-Haitian Task Force. Sergio Pereira reported that, although “[t]he governor of Arkansas is extremely concerned about the security of Fort Smith residents with the consolidation [of] Chaffee,” the military worried that the extra fencing around the detention center was “too much” and that it would create a “concentration camp atmosphere."[28] The director of the Task Force, Christian Holmes, wrote to the directors of all the detention centers to encourage them to talk with Cubans about the physical confines in which they would be held. "I am particularly concerned that they have a good picture of Chaffee," Holmes wrote, "in particular, I recommend that you explain to them that there is a large fence around Chaffee and why the fence is there. We have to make sure they realize they are not being placed into a prison but rather are being placed in a facility to enhance their resettlement opportunities."[29] Administrators claimed that the consolidation of Mariel migrants would enable voluntary agencies to coordinate their efforts and locate sponsors more efficiently. Whether or not that was true, Fort Chaffee began to look even more like a prison after consolidation. Governor Bill Clinton demanded the right to approve the security plan, and he issued a press release in September with an enumerated list of 19 concerns about the current state of the plan.[30] Despite attempting to coat the conversation about Fort Chaffee in a humanitarian veneer, the Carter administration was primarily interested in preventing future demonstrations and mollifying furious Arkansas politicians and their uneasy constituents by agreeing to "clamp down a little tighter" on the detained Cubans.[31] That meant responding to each one of Clinton's concerns within one day of his press release.[32] And it meant building the fence.

---

[26] Memo, Thru Grail Brookshire to Harry T. Johnson, September 9, 1980, Folder 5 “Gastón A. Fernández: Consolidation, 1980,” Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[27] “Fact Sheet,” September 1980, Folder “Camp Consolidation [1],” Box 1, CHTF.

For the Cuban-Haitian Task Force, tightening security also meant thoroughly dividing up the population of Cubans at Fort Chaffee. The "mentally ill, the criminals and sexual deviants," as the editors of one Arkansas newspaper put it, were to be "sorted out" before consolidation.[33]

---

[28] Memo, Pereira to Holmes, August 20, 1980.

[29] Memo, Christian R. Holmes to All Camp Directors, September 9, 1980, Folder "Camp Consolidation [3]," Box 1, CHTF.

[30] Press release, Bill Clinton, September 11, 1980, Folder "Fort Chaffee [2]," Box 4, CHTF.

[31] Stafford, "Arkansas Leaders Share 'Outrage.'"

[32] Letter, Christian R. Holmes to Bill Clinton, September 12, 1980, Folder "Fort Chaffee [2]," Box 4, CHTF.

[33] "The Arkansas Press: Fort Chaffee and the Cuban Refugees," *Arkansas Gazette,* August 3, 1980, Folder "Fort Chaffee [1]," Box 4, CHTF.

Cubans with mental illnesses were transferred to St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C.. Those who had been charged with crimes deemed serious were sent to BOP and INS prisons. Meanwhile, there were various suggestions for classifying the people who would be transferred to the detention center in Arkansas. Sergio Pereira concurred with the recommendations of military staff at Chaffee and called for segregating the migrants in the following manner:

> Area I - legal families
>   single women of good character
>   persons over 60 years of age
> Area II - couples living in joint domicile (camp families)
> Area III - homosexuals and prostitutes
> Area IV - single men of good character
> Area V - increased security area for offenders
> Area VI - minors

The sections that were eventually fenced off within Fort Chaffee were somewhat less specific. There was an area established for families, one for unaccompanied minors, and one for the "general population" of mostly single men. The INS maintained a "Level II Housing" area for "malcontents/troublemakers"—often people who had jumped the fence, gotten into fights, or broken various rules—and the BOP operated a stockade for "those committing crimes in camp."[34] Many of the Cubans already living in the two-story wooden barracks at Fort Chaffee found the new security measures disconcerting. Raul Garcia Moreno, who talked to a reporter through an interpreter, said, "It was like I was in prison for 21 years when I was in Cuba…Now I am here in another prison. It's like a concentration camp." He did not want to live alongside the "troublemakers" from other detention centers nor did he want to live in a place that felt more and more like a prison.[35] When those unwelcome newcomers finally arrived, they were walked past a line of dozens of federal law enforcement agents, screened with metal detectors, issued new ID cards, and ushered through a gate in the high chain-link fence.[36]

---

[34] Memo, David Crosland to Paul R. Michel, August 16, 1980, Folder "Camp Consolidation [1]," Box 1, CHTF; Memo, Holmes to All Camp Directors, September 9, 1980.

[35] Associated Press, "Ft. Chaffee Becomes 'Concentration Camp' Awaiting More Cubans," *Washington Post,* September 11, 1980.

The Limits of Color-Blindness

Other than a few notes and memoranda with information about the racial demographics of Fort Chaffee, the Cuban-Haitian Task Force kept few race-conscious records after consolidation. Given that there was rise in the concentration of black and *mulato* Cubans from 50 to 75 percent between September and January, however, there could be little doubt that race was continuing to shape what happened inside the Carter administration's detention centers. That impact was most obvious in the resettlement process. When it came deciding whether to sponsor a Mariel migrant—whether to bring a person into one's home—color-blindness simply did not apply.

The Task Force aimed to center its resettlement efforts on places in the U.S. with established Cuban-born populations, including Miami, New York, New Jersey, Chicago, Atlanta, and Los Angeles, on the premise that these locations already had support systems for the new migrants.[37] To some extent, that was a fair assumption. On the other hand, after an initial surge of volunteerism, support from established Cuban communities had dwindled considerably. The multiple reports of violence in the detention centers over the summer further cooled the already tepid support for a group of people who did not fit the mold of previous generations of Cuban migrants. Sergio Pereira, one of those white Cuban exiles, demonstrated an empathy for the new migrants that was increasingly rare within the Cuban-born community in Miami. But his call for compassion was coupled with an assimilationist message and a paternalistic attitude towards the

---

[36] *La Libertad* (Fort Indiantown Gap) V, no. 21, September 29, 1980, Folder "La Libertad-Fort Indiantown Gap 6/11/80-10/10/80," Box 36, CHTF; Associated Press, "First Refugees From Other Sites Start Arriving at Arkansas Camp," *New York Times,* September 26, 1980.

[37] "Transcript of Eidenberg's meeting and speech-Chaffee," August 5, 1980.

(largely non-white) people living in detention centers. Pereira believed that the "established Cuban-American community" must take responsibility for resettling the "difficult" population that remained in the detention centers. He urged the Task Force to partner with the Cuban National Planning Committee and other exile organizations, which could "work as a quasi-VOLAG in the resettlement process of this hard-core group." Pereira hoped that the Mariel migrants would "follow the footsteps of the first exiles twenty years ago and become productive citizens."[38] His wish was steeped in the myth of the "Cuban success story." He had lived that story. He seemed to want people from Mariel to have the chance to live it, but he also wanted to ensure that their stories did not threaten the reputation he and other Cubans had cultivated for themselves.

Like Pereira, the leadership of the Junta Patriótica Cubana (JPC) exile organization worried about the negative "public perception of the [Mariel migrant] population among Cuban-Americans." Also like Pereira, the Miami-based group sought to improve the image of the new arrivals, in part, by urging the Carter administration to separate the "decent people" from the "criminals." How these categories should be determined was not clear. In a letter to the U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, the JPC leaders noted that perhaps "[s]taff with social work background could classify the people." "Most importantly," they wrote, "political prisoners" needed to be taken out of the detention centers and given refugee status immediately. The JPC was decidedly less interested in advocating for the people who had been locked up in Cuba for petty theft or for "homosexual acts," or in helping the Cubans who were then incarcerated in U.S. prisons. Notwithstanding their preoccupation with conventionally defined political prisoners, the exile organization called for improved conditions and paid work opportunities for all Cubans inside Fort Chaffee after consolidation. They argued that the Mariel migrants "should find there not a prision [sic], but a situation similar to a halfway house, where 'leave' passes are issued."[39] If the Carter administration ever viewed that option as politically viable, the time for it had passed. There would be no open gate at the "resettlement camp" in Arkansas.

---

[38] Memo, Pereira to Holmes, August 20, 1980.

Although Cubans in the U.S. continued working to locate their family members and bring them home, even among relatives there was no guarantee of sponsorship. At the beginning of the summer, when thousands of families were traveling to the detention centers to visit their relatives who had recently arrived, many stopped short of agreeing to serve as sponsors.[40] Their reasons varied. In some cases, families simply could not afford to support their relatives. In the case of Ramón, whose half-brother lived in Coral Gables, it was specifically because he was "black" that his relative refused to take him in. Whether or not Ramón's case was typical, the changing demographics of Fort Chaffee demonstrated that black and *mulato* Cubans had a harder time finding sponsors. While neighborhoods like Coral Gables demanded adherence to rigid racial norms, these rules were not entirely foreign to Cuban migrants. They brought anti-black attitudes with them.[41] Many members of "*La Comunidad"* (The Community), as the Cuban-born population in Miami was known, did not identify with the new arrivals and actively distanced themselves from them. One way they managed this was by coining a term to distinguish the newcomers: *marielitos*. A diminutive iteration of Mariel, *marielito* was a condescending nickname at once familiar and laden with all of the negative representations that circulated regarding the Cuban migrants of 1980. In that sense, it was not so different from another diminutive term commonly used in Cuba and around the Caribbean, "*negrito*" (blackie). Like countless other slurs, *marielito* eventually lost some of its sting, and many Mariel migrants began to use it to identify themselves. Throughout the 1980s, though, it was common for people who came from Mariel to deny that they had entered the U.S. during the boatlift in order to evade the stigma, and the disparaging nickname, attached to that group.

---

[39] Letter, Junta Patriótica Cubana to Victor Palmieri, September 8, 1980, Folder "Camp Consolidation [2]," Box 1, CHTF.

[40] "FCO Notes," June 3, 1980, Folder 6 "Gastón A. Fernández: Federal Coordinating Office Reports, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC; "Transcript of Eidenberg's meeting and speech-Chaffee," August 5, 1980.

[41] For a synthesis of the ways in which other migrants in the U.S. have evinced "race-thinking before coming," see Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White*.

As people from the U.S. became more aware of the racial composition of the Mariel migrants, their racial prejudices became more evident. Some were candid about how their anti-black feelings affected the sponsorship process. Carol Whitlock sponsored a Cuban from Fort McCoy in September and later published her diary entries about the experience in the *Miami Herald*. Earlier in the summer, Whitlock had joined other families from her church near Hager City, Wisconsin, in sponsoring a Vietnamese family. In September, she and her husband deliberated over whether to sponsor a Cuban before the group at Fort McCoy was transferred to Fort Chaffee. The "bad publicity" gave them pause—there was a story circulating at the time about a Mariel migrant from McCoy who murdered his sponsor—but Whitlock decided to go to the detention center to see about the possibility of sponsoring someone. At the base, a staff member from a voluntary agency introduced her to a man named Alfredo. "He is very black," Whitlock wrote. "We have requested a Hispanic man because of the community acceptance problem. Maybe I secretly feel safer with a lighter-skinned man around." Whitlock initially declined to sponsor Alfredo. He was "black" and not "Hispanic," after all. But she and her family met with Alfredo several more times and ultimately decided to bring him into their home.[42]

---

[42] Carol Whitlock, "A Refugee Sponsor's Diary of Love," *Miami Herald*, December 21, 1980.

Whitlock told her next-door neighbor in her all-white town about the plan. Her neighbor was not pleased. As Whitlock waited for Alfredo at the bus station, the television played a news segment about a Mariel migrant who raped the daughter of his sponsor. Despite the fears engendered by such horrific stories, Whitlock soon saw that Alfredo had no intention of raping or murdering anybody. He got along great with Whitlock, her husband, and their children. The same could not always be said for others in their community. A few days after Alfredo arrived, a woman at the supermarket was visibly disturbed to see him walking down the aisle with Whitlock's blonde toddler in his arms. For the most part, though, people in Whitlock's town were kind to Alfredo. He found a job quickly, and he began renting a room on his own after just three weeks. Whitlock was told Alfredo would have trouble finding a place to live. No doubt many black Mariel migrants did have trouble on the rental market, which meant that even those who found sponsors could face intense housing insecurity. Alfredo did encounter one "obvious act of discrimination," in Whitlock's view. She did not explain the incident, but it happened at her church, and it was perpetrated by a person who had been "very involved in helping the Vietnamese families." Whitlock did not mention if the interaction bothered Alfredo, but it clearly hurt her. "I am sad to think that some refugees are better than other refugees," she wrote.[43]

While Whitlock was not alone in her uneasiness about sponsoring a black Cuban, she was exceedingly rare among white people in her willingness to set aside her racist attitudes for the sake of serving as a sponsor. Paula Dominique oversaw the resettlement efforts of the Church World Service in Fort Chaffee. In December, she told the *New York Times*, "There are people who call up and request a white, college-educated Cuban who speaks English." She sometimes had to inform such callers that her organization was "not a Sears catalogue." As much as

---

[43] Ibid.

Dominique clearly resented those requests, the numbers demonstrated a preference among potential sponsors for migrants with lighter skin, and it likely affected how voluntary agencies approached their caseloads of Cubans. The U.S. government had begun paying a commission to VOLAGS like the Church World Service in June. For each Cuban (and Haitian) resettled before June 19, the organization received $100. After June 19, the per capita grant for resettlement raised to $300. As consolidation neared, the amount was increased to $1000 per capita for Cubans in the general population at Fort Chaffee and $2000 per capita for Cubans whose sponsorships had broken down and thus ended up in the "Tent City" that the City of Miami established under I-95, in a space that later became José Marti Park. Around the same time, the per capita grant for Haitians was raised to $500 per person because that was the rate used for southeast Asian refugees. The Carter administration considered Haitians to be "more similar to Indochinese refugees," presumably in that they did not have a reputation for being criminals.[44]

Although the grants were calibrated to the perceived "difficulty" of each caseload, the dollar amounts did not take race into account. The color-blind approach of the Carter administration did not allow for such adjustments. Any policy that assigned a higher monetary value to the resettlement of one racial group would have drawn intense criticism. It would have seemed callous and antithetical to the work of liberal Democrats who had enacted and enforced legislation that prohibited racial discrimination. It would have smacked of hypocrisy and been deemed "reverse discrimination" by the same people who opposed affirmative action. Thus, even though there was ample evidence to suggest that black and *mulato* Cubans were less likely to find sponsors, the bureaucracy in charge of their detention treated them the same as their white counterparts. For VOLAGS aiming to secure funding to maintain their resettlement work, even the most cursory cost-benefit analysis would have demonstrated the dangers of investing extra energy in finding sponsors for people who were black or *mulato*.[45]

---

[44] "Statement by Victor Palmieri, United States Coordinator for Refugee Affairs," June 20, 1980, Folder "Reading File," Box 16, CHTF; "CHTF Director's Briefing Materials for the Senate Appropriations Committee Hearings Held During the Week of March 2, 1981," March 1981, Folder "Hearing Transcript and Briefing Books [1]," Box 4, CHTF.

Fortunately for Mariel migrants with darker skin, there were potential sponsors who did not view blackness as a handicap or a threat. Eduardo Gamarra observed that some of the black and *mulato* Cubans in Fort Chaffee quickly established a rapport with the cafeteria staff, most of whom were black women from the United States. As the months went by, some of the black employees began sponsoring the Mariel migrants whom they befriended at the base.[46] Billye Carter, who worked at Fort Chaffee, sponsored several black Cubans from the detention center. She later told a reporter from *The Oklahoman* newspaper, "The first Cubans who came looked white. And then some of the other ones were black." “You hate to say it,” Billye lamented, “but I think there was a reaction to that." Her husband, Don Carter, agreed: “After the darker-skinned Cubans came, people started getting leery and the sponsorships stopped.”[47]

No Place to Go

Through the consolidation at Fort Chaffee, the Carter administration effectively spatialized the “undesirability” of Mariel migrants by confining the “hard to resettle,” the “hard-core,” the less “sponsorable”—the increasingly black and *mulato*—population to a restricted and heavily policed area. Even with the big fence and razor wire separating them, the residents of nearby towns feared the Cubans. They often expressed their anxieties in language connected to notions of community and home. State Representative Carolyn Pollan told the *Arkansas Gazette*, "I am sure there are some good people, but for the most part, they are not the type of people we'd like to have as neighbors."[48] The possibility that Mariel migrants might enter one's neighborhood was most acute in Miami, where over 70 percent of the new arrivals were living. Most of the group that was resettled in south Florida had family members in the area, but thousands more made their way to Miami despite efforts to disperse them around the country.[49] In a significant number of cases, Mariel migrants whose sponsorships broke down ended up living on the streets.[50] Since black and *mulato* Cubans were less likely to have family members and friendship networks in the U.S., they were especially vulnerable when their sponsorships broke down. They also faced housing discrimination, which severely limited their options.[51]

---

[45] In an interview with the author, Siro Del Castillo indicated that there was little incentive for VOLAGS to invest time and money in finding sponsors for black and *mulato* Cubans or for people with disabilities. Del Castillo was a white Cuban-born administrator at Krome Detention Center and Fort Chaffee. A former political prisoner himself, he was an advocate for Cubans from Mariel. He sponsored one of the new migrants himself—a young man who was gay, *mulato*, and had a prison record in Cuba.

[46] Gamarra, interview with the author.

[47] Melissa Nelson, “Boatlift Vivid Memory for Cubans in Arkansas,” *NewsOK*, April 8, 2001, accessed April 15, 2016, http://newsok.com/boatlift-vivid-memory-for-cubans-in-arkansas/article/2736746.

For the white Cuban establishment in the Miami area, the people from Mariel represented a threat to the order of the city and the image of a "successful" Cuban community that had been constructed there over recent decades. Several years after the boatlift, a white Cuban-born official for the City of Miami reflected on the legacy of the new migrants, claiming that "Mariel destroyed the image of Cubans in the United States and, in passing, destroyed the image of Miami itself for tourism," he said. "The *marielitos* are mostly Black and mulattoes of a color that I never saw or believed existed in Cuba. They don't have social networks; they roam the streets desperate to return to Cuba."[52] The official's claim on what it meant to be Cuban was tied to the city's racial-spatial order, which was threatened by the people who were living in such clear view on the streets of Miami.

---

[48] Peggy Watson, "Remaining Refugees Will Be Assigned to Fort Chaffee," *Arkansas Gazette,* August 2, 1980, Folder "Fort Chaffee [1]," Box 4, CHTF.

[49] Memo, Nathan J. Stark to Jack Watson, April 29, 1980, Folder "Cuban Situation: Reports to the White House," Box 1, CHTF; Letter, Frederick M. Bohen to William Lehman, November 11, 1980, Folder "Bohen Papers," Box 1, CHTF.

[50] Memo, Nathan J. Stark to Jack Watson, June 18, 1980, Folder "Cuban Situation: Reports to the White House," Box 1, CHTF; "CHTF Director's Briefing Materials for the Senate Appropriations Committee Hearings Held During the Week of March 2, 1981," March 1981.

[51] On the history race and urban development in Miami, see N. D. B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). On racial segregation within the Miami Cuban community, see Boswell, "Racial and Ethnic Change and Hispanic Residential Segregation Patterns in Metropolitan Miami, 1980."

The desire to enforce that order and preserve the reputation of established Cubans led to a plan to revoke the paroles of Mariel migrants whose sponsorships broke down. In early December, Sylvester Ligsukis and Charles Cain of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force met with the Miami City Manager, Dade County Assistant Manager, the president of the school board, a county commissioner, and the "Executive Vice President of a large realty development company." They discussed a proposal to conduct a "sweep" of Mariel migrants without homes or sponsors, in which they would revoke their INS paroles for violating local vagrancy laws and then send them to a new makeshift detention center scheduled to open at Fort Allen in Puerto Rico.[53] City and county officials blamed this group of Cubans for the rising crime rate in the area, and the plan depended on a tentative partnership between local law enforcement and the INS. Miami police would arrest people for minor violations, "such as sleeping in a city park after dark," and take them to court. Prosecuting attorneys would work with the INS in advance to assure that they were able to establish the necessary facts to justify parole revocation.[54] In some ways, this proposal foreshadowed the cooperation between local law enforcement agencies and the INS that was made possible by Section 287 (g) of the Immigration and National Act, an amendment created through the "Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act," which President Bill Clinton signed into law in 1996.

---

[52] Quoted in Portes and Stepick, *City on the Edge*, 21.

[53] The proposal to send Cubans and Haitians to Puerto Rico was met with intense opposition. Many Puerto Ricans viewed the plan as a symbol of U.S. colonialism and accused the Carter administration of attempting to use the island to "dump his trash" right before the election. For a more thorough examination of this dynamic, see Lipman, "The Fish Trusts the Water, and It Is in the Water That It Is Cooked."

[54] Memo, Sylvester Ligsukis to Frederick M. Bohen, December 11, 1980, Folder "INS [1]," Box 36, CHTF.

Back in 1980, Ligsukis and Cain raised serious concerns about the constitutionality of the plan for a coordinated "sweep," and proposed targeting only "the more serious criminals who, in the judgment of law enforcement officials, could not be rehabilitated." Essentially, they suggested an approach consistent with the system of classification developed in the Carter administration's detention centers during the previous months. The "undesirables" would be put out of sight. The people deemed worthy of the effort would be placed in a "systematic social intervention program to provide housing, jobs and acculturation and other services to the entrants to assist with their integration into America society." Ligsukis and Cain thus attempted to dissuade the largely Cuban-born group of city officials from locking up the "street people" by proposing a solution that reflected the approach the Carter administration had taken all along. It was a selectively humanitarian response rooted in projects of classification, confinement, and assimilation.[55]

In the end, the Department of Justice compromised with the city and state officials who pressured the INS to conduct a "roundup" of Cubans without homes. Federal immigration agents could, in theory, detain any of the new migrants who did not have an active sponsor, a job, or a permanent address. However, the INS was hesitant to seek out Cubans living on the streets and revoke their paroles simply because they violated vagrancy ordinances. Instead, the agency agreed to review the cases of Mariel migrants being held in the overcrowded Dade County jail and to transfer those arrested for misdemeanors to federal detention centers.[56] All of this occurred just months after some of the same Miami leaders had convinced the Carter administration to help them get rid of the Cubans living in Tent City under I-95 after their sponsorships broke down. The federal government promised extra funding to the VOLAGS that found placements for people from Tent City.[57] After local authorities announced that they were closing the encampment, police were stationed at the gate—not to prevent the Cubans from getting *out*, but to keep them from getting back *in*. Assistant City Manager Cesar Odio, a white Cuban, had a simple message for the Mariel migrants who wanted to stay in Tent City rather than get resettled out of the Miami area: "Pick up your belongings, walk out the gates and solve your own problems."[58] Of course, Odio and other city and state leaders did not see sleeping outside as an acceptable solution. Thus, when some of the Mariel migrants without homes began living in parks and on the streets, they developed their proposal for a "sweep."

---

[55] Ibid.

[56] "Drive to Resettle Homeless Renewed," *Miami Herald,* December 13, 1980; Bob Murphy and Morton Lucoff, "Monthly Prisoner Releases to Relieve Crowding of Jail," *Miami News*, December 31, 1980.

William Lehman, the U.S. Representative for Florida's 13th District, was one of the leaders who put pressure on the Carter administration to do something about the Mariel migrants without homes. He wanted the federal government to send them to a "controlled environment." The *Miami Herald* editors agreed with Lehman; although, they felt the need to begin their editorial on the subject with a disclaimer about the "instinctive revulsion on the part of most Americans to anything that resembles the World War II internment camps for Japanese-Americans." "Nevertheless," the editors continued, "there are worse things than Government camps for refugees." The *Herald* editors suggested that the "honest, hardworking Mariel entrants and their counterparts from Haiti" could be sent to Fort Allen in Puerto Rico or somewhere else.[59] Anywhere else would do.

---

[57] "Task Force Plan for Removal of Tent City," September 3, 1980, Folder 5 "Gastón A. Fernández: Consolidation, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[58] Associated Press, "First Refugees From Other Sites Start Arriving at Arkansas Camp," *New York Times,* September 26, 1980.

[59] Editorial, "First Step on the Refugees: 'A Controlled Environment,'" *Miami Herald*, December 11, 1980.

Absent from the conversation about the need to establish a "controlled environment" was any mention of the detention center the federal government was already running in Arkansas. The Carter administration had been operating such spaces for almost eight months, but the roughly 6,000 people who remained in Fort Chaffee were of little concern to Florida leaders. Their priority was finding another place to 'put' the Mariel migrants living in Miami. In that sense, their attitude mirrored that of the incoming president. The 1980 election was a landslide victory for Ronald Reagan, who cited Carter's handling of the Mariel boatlift as one of his many leadership failures. Reagan promised to be "tough" on Fidel Castro and resolve the crises resulting from the Mariel boatlift. That included making a commitment to Frank White, the new Republican governor of Arkansas, to get the Cubans out of Fort Chaffee.[60] White defeated Bill Clinton in the 1980 gubernatorial election using the unofficial campaign slogan, "car tags and Cubans," to remind voters that Clinton raised the fee for license plate tags and failed to stop the Carter administration from using Chaffee as a consolidation site for people from Mariel. White even ran an attack ad against Clinton with images of "rioting" Cubans.[61] While the Cuban-Haitian Task Force continued working to find sponsors for the people left in the detention center at Fort Chaffee, the humanitarian thread that had been intertwined with Carter's punitive policies began to unravel under Reagan. With a new president in Washington and a new governor in Little Rock, the question was not how best to resettle the greatest number of people but rather how to get them out of Arkansas as quickly as possible, regardless of whether that was via sponsorships or through continued institutionalization. This shift in focus was not good for the predominantly black and *mulato* group of people detained at Fort Chaffee. Even under a president who had positioned the Cuban-Haitian Task Force under the Department of Health and Human Services and fostered a humanitarian, if paternalistic, discourse regarding Mariel migrants, the new arrivals faced discrimination and highly racialized practices of policing, surveillance, and confinement. The approach of the new administration did nothing to improve their situation.

---

[60] Combined Miami News Services, "Reagan's Tough Line on Cuba Shaping Up," *Miami News*, December 4, 1980; Associated Press, "U.S. haste on refugees cost millions, insiders say," *Chicago Tribune*, November 25, 1981.

[61] Tom W. Dillard, "Frank Durward White (1933-2003)," *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, October 22, 2015, accessed April 15, 2016, http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=125; "Politics Key to the Fate Of Camp's Last Cubans," *New York Times*, January 4, 1982.

The staff of the Cuban-Haitian Task Force and a handful of voluntary agencies continued to seek sponsors for Cubans at Fort Chaffee in the early months of 1981. The Task Force developed a variety of strategies for placing people with mental illnesses, intellectual and physical disabilities, and those in the general population who were classified as "anti-social" but without "mental problems." The goal was to resettle all but 654 of the Mariel migrants at Chaffee by the end of March. The actual number at that point turned out to be closer to 3,000.[62] The process went much slower than authorities anticipated, and Fort Chaffee remained the subject of stories that further diminished Cubans' prospects for sponsorship. A *Kansas City Star* article described the detention center as a heavily policed "ghetto of dreams" with an extensive black market, widespread drug use, gang violence, prostitution, and sexually frustrated men who were forced to "turn to homosexuality." An unnamed administrator told the reporters, "If you write about this…tell the people this is the most screwed up place anywhere."[63] In January, the World Relief Organization proposed placing a large group of the detained Mariel migrants in several locations in eastern Texas. The swift and virulent backlash of local residents derailed the plan almost immediately. In a meeting with the voluntary agency, a number of Texans expressed concerns that there were inadequate employment and housing opportunities for Cubans in the region. The *Washington Post* reported that Texas State Representative Buck Florence opposed the resettlement proposal because he heard people from Mariel "urinate in public and are prone to masturbation."[64] The earlier *Kansas City Star* article had reported that some of the men inside Fort Chaffee masturbated while standing next to female employees and then ejaculated on their clothing. Perhaps Florence had read that story or another one like it.

---

[62] "Fort Chaffee – Resettlement Plan," February 4, 1981, Folder "Fort Chaffee #2," Box 4, CHTF; Memo, Barbara K. Lawson to Jim Coyle and Jan Moreno, Folder "Fort Chaffee [2]," Box 4, CHTF.

[63] Bleys W. Rose and L. David Harris, "Fort Chaffee: A nightmare in a ghetto of dreams," *Kansas City Star,* January 18, 1981, Folder "Correspondence Selected for Standard Language Response [3]," Box 20, CHTF.

People almost certainly did such things in the detention center at Fort Chaffee, just as they did in prisons, buses, and city parks. There was blood shed inside the base, as well. At the end of January, Julio Villelo Alvarez allegedly got a hold of a pistol—probably in the illicit market that operated among Cubans and Chaffee employees—and shot another Mariel migrant in the side.[65] There were two stabbing deaths reported by early February, one of which was purported to have been the result of an argument over a game of dominoes.[66] News coverage continued to center on instances of unrest, illegal activity, and violence in the detention centers. Once again, what detention center employees saw as relatively minor "disturbances" became "riots" or "melees" in the public imagination. While few Cubans were committing murders or sexual assaults, such cases played an outsized role in media coverage.

The effects of negative representations in the press weighed heavily on black and *mulato* Cubans, and the employees of the voluntary agencies knew it. They continued to encounter potential sponsors who refused to take in a "black Cuban."[67] Despite the knowledge that race mattered for resettlement, race appeared nowhere in a detailed strategy developed at the beginning of March to expedite the resettlement process. The Task Force classified about 1,500 of the remaining 3,900 Mariel migrants as “regular resettlements,” meaning that the typical sponsorship method of placing them with an individual or family would be sufficient. Administrators determined that 1,448 of the Cubans still at Chaffee needed some sort of “transitional living,” such as a rehabilitation center or a halfway house. People with physical disabilities and histories of substance abuse were included in his category, as were 34 pregnant women. The largest subgroup within the “transitional living” category was labeled “socially dysfunctional.” These were people who, according to social workers and Public Health Service bureaucrats, were “pre-literate,” demonstrated “low impulse control,” and/or had generally “negative personal characteristics.” Officials decided that the final category of Cubans, consisting of about 1,200 people, needed a “structured environment.” This included people alleged to have committed felonies in Cuba or in the U.S., people who had not committed crimes but whose behavior was considered “severely anti-social,” people with mental illness, and people with intellectual disabilities. Proposed placement sites for the subgroups within this category ranged from in-patient psychiatric hospitals, to reentry programs, to federal prisons.[68]

---

[64] "Cubans Won't Move, WRO Office Says," *Southwest Times Record*, January 31, 1981, Folder "Correspondence Selected for Standard Language Response [3]," Box 20, CHTF; Charles R. Babcock, "Resettling of Cuban Refugees Is Proceeding at a Slow Pace, *Washington Post*, February 10, 1981.

[65] "Shooting suspect arrested, *Southwest Times Record*, February 2, 1981, Folder "Correspondence Selected for Standard Language Response [3]," Box 20, CHTF.

[66] Gazette State News, "Cuban Refugee Fatally Stabbed in Dominos Argument at Chaffee," *Arkansas Gazette*, February 9, 1981, Folder "Correspondence Selected for Standard Language Response [3]," Box 20, CHTF.

[67] Gastón A. Fernández, *The Mariel Exodus Twenty Years Later: A Study on the Politics of Stigma and a Research Bibliography* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 2002), 74.

Voluntary agencies made specific arrangements for the various subcategories of Cubans defined by the March resettlement strategy. For instance, they made plans to place “rural workers” who wanted to live in an agrarian environment at Fellowship Farm, a non-profit organization in the countryside near Philadelphia. Agencies also conducted particular outreach efforts on behalf of people from Mariel who were gay—group that faced discrimination in Cuba and the U.S. and had difficulty finding sponsors through typical channels. The United States

---

[68] Memo, Wilford J. Forbush to Jack Svahn, March 10, 1981, Folder 1 “Gastón A. Fernández: Office of the Attorney General, 1981-1982,” Box 2, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

Catholic Conference and Church World Service subcontracted with the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco to find placements for some 2,500 gay men who entered the U.S. during the boatlift. The church helped mobilize sponsors from LGBT communities around the country.

There were no comparable efforts on the part of the Task Force to address the fact that the proportion of black and *mulato* people at Fort Chaffee was growing rapidly and public perceptions of this group continued to deteriorate. In April, a Federal Protection Service officer at Chaffee shot a Cuban, allegedly because he was attempting to stab someone. According to Task Force spokesperson Art Brill, about 150 people reacted to the shooting by destroying cars and breaking into buildings. Law enforcement agents intervened, and 39 members of the security force and 27 Cubans were hurt.[69] In subsequent days, hundreds of calls came in to the "Sponsorship Information" line. The Task Force director for Fort Chaffee reported that most were complaints about the federal government spending money on "very ungrateful people" during hard economic times.[70] The limited public goodwill for the Mariel migrants was reaching its nadir, the Task Force established under the previous administration was short on staff, the chief concern of the new U.S. president was fulfilling his promise to the new governor of Arkansas to close the detention center by August, and there were no major coordinated efforts to account for the ways race shaped resettlement prospects for black and *mulato* Cubans.[71] It should have been little wonder, then, that of the 1,600 people left in Fort Chaffee in June, 95% were young black men.[72]

---

[69] Memo, Arthur P. Brill to CHTF Staff, April 20, 1981, Folder "Fort Chaffee [2]," Box 4, CHTF.
[70] Memo, Barbara K. Lawson to John Cannon, April 22, 1981, Folder "Fort Chaffee [2]," Box 4, CHTF.
[71] Memo, Barbara K. Lawson to John Cannon, April 14, 1981, Folder "Fort Chaffee [2]," Box 4, CHTF.
[72] "Status Report – Fort Chaffee," June 1981, Folder 5 "Gastón A. Fernández: Consolidation, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

Throughout the summer of 1981 at Fort Chaffee, the reduced Cuban-Haitian Task Force staff was overworked and under supported. Most of the remaining Mariel migrants were anxious or angry about their continued confinement, and virtually every proposal for resettlement sites or a new detention center location was met with a protest. In July, several voluntary agencies pulled out of Fort Chaffee and a number of government staff members left.[73] In the meantime, over a dozen communities around the country blocked resettlement plans devised by VOLAGS and private organizations. From the San Diego suburbs, to Kansas City, to Queens, New York, nobody wanted the people from Mariel. In San Diego County, California, where tens of thousands of southeast Asians had recently moved, the prevailing feeling was that the community had already taken in more than its fair share of newcomers. In Glasgow, Montana, the directors of a county-owned industrial park on a former Air Force base were fired in the aftermath of protests that erupted when residents learned of plans to use the space for 450 Cubans from Fort Chaffee.[74]

Faced with such opposition to piecemeal relocation efforts, the Reagan administration explored possibilities for constructing a permanent detention center. On July 30, the Department of Justice issued a press release from the Task Force on Immigration and Refugee Policy, which Reagan established several months prior. One of the recommendations, listed under the subheading "Arrival of Undocumented Aliens by Sea," was a direct response to the Mariel boatlift. The recommendation called for "increased resources for the development of additional permanent facilities in which temporarily to detain illegal aliens upon arrival pending exclusion or granting asylum, to prevent heavy impacts on local areas."[75] The INS did not have any detention centers like the one proposed by Reagan's Task Force. The agency made that abundantly clear in response to earlier proposals to send Mariel migrants to the small prisons the INS operated in El Centro, California, and El Paso and Port Isabel, Texas. In a letter to the U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, an INS official explained that those institutions were "low-level security operations designed only for administrative, non-criminal and short-term purposes. Detention of illegal, but non-criminal aliens ranges from 1 to 10 days."[76] Fort Chaffee continued to hold Cubans from Mariel because there were no prisons for long-term, large-scale migrant detention. The Reagan administration wanted to develop such institutions for use during future influxes.

---

[73] Letter, Barbara K. Lawson to Diane Arnold, July 30, 1981, Folder 2 "Barbara Lawson: Correspondence, 1980-81," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC; Assorted letters, Barbara K. Lawson, July and August 1981, Folder 2 "Barbara Lawson: Correspondence, 1980-81," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[74] Robert Lindsey, "U.S. Is Finding That No One Wants to Accept Last Cuban Refugees," *New York Times*, August 9, 1981.

That policy recommendation did not originate with Reagan, however. During the last two years of Jimmy Carter's presidency, a Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy met regularly to discuss possible changes to the laws governing various categories of migrants. The Select Commission issued a 450-page report on March 1, 1981, five days *before* Reagan established his Task Force. Among their recommendations, the Carter-era Commission members called for funding to enable "higher levels of apprehension, detention and deportation throughout the year to discourage undocumented/illegal aliens from entering or remaining in the United States." The Select Commission also recommended the creation of permanent or semi-permanent "asylum processing centers" where large groups of asylum seekers could be detained and processed. In addition to creating a more efficient process, the commissioners hoped that by opening such facilities a "deterrent would be provided for those who might see an asylum claim as a means of circumventing U.S. immigration law" because they "would not be able to join their families or obtain work while at the processing center."[77] Rather than pioneering a newly punitive approach, Reagan's Task Force appeared to be reading from the playbook written by the Select Commission under Carter.

---

[75] Press release, "U.S. Immigration and Refugee Policy," July 30, 1981, Folder 1 "Gastón A. Fernández: Office of the Attorney General, 1981-1982," Box 2, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[76] Letter, Andrew J. Carmichael, Jr. to Victor Palmieri, September 2, 1980, Folder "Fort McCoy [1]," Box 4, CHTF.

Conclusion

Getting approval and funding to construct a permanent detention center would take time, though, and the most pressing question for the Reagan White House was how to get Cubans out of Arkansas. The Cuban-Haitian Task Force continued finding sponsors for Mariel migrants where they could, and the number of staff continued to decline. Barbara Lawson, the Task Force director at Fort Chaffee since November, left her post almost exactly one year after she got there. In a farewell letter to Paula Dominique of the Church World Service, she reflected on the work that the two had done there. "A year ago we all started working together on what some thought was a near impossible job with the 'hardcore,'" Lawson wrote. "But as we tackled the problem we found the reality of human beings eager for a new start in life."[78] For over 400 people still inside Fort Chaffee, that "new start" remained elusive.[79] As 1981 drew to a close, the Reagan administration focused its energy on finding alternative detention sites.[80] The chief goal was no longer resettlement; it was removal.

In December 1981 and January 1982, with Governor Frank White again pressuring the White House to close the Cuban "camp" at Chaffee, there was a renewed call to build a detention center in Glasgow, Montana.[81] Critics immediately raised concerns about the cost of the transfer and claimed it was merely an expensive way of appeasing the Arkansas governor. The plan was cancelled soon after.[82] At that point, officials stopped looking to build a facility in which to house the Mariel migrants, and the resettlement effort became a warehousing project. At the end of January and beginning of February 1982, the Department of Justice announced that the 392 people who remained in Fort Chaffee would be sent to federal prisons. Regardless of whether they had ever committed any sort of illegal act, they were locked up in maximum security penal institutions because, in the words of one department spokesperson, it was "cheaper to keep them there." Most of this group of almost entirely black and *mulato* people were sent to the United States Penitentiary in Atlanta.[83] There, the people from Fort Chaffee joined another disproportionately black and *mulato* group of about 1,200 Cubans. Many of the Mariel migrants already in Atlanta had been charged with crimes in Cuba or in the U.S. and subsequently ordered "excludable" by INS officials, but the agency could not deport them because the Cuban government would not take them back. For thousands of Cubans in the Atlanta Penitentiary and in other prisons around the United States, their indefinite detention was just beginning.

---

[77] Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy, *U.S. Immigration Policy and the National Interest*: *The Final Report and Recommendations of the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy with Supplemental Views by Commissioners* (Submitted to the Congress and the President of the United States, March 1, 1981), 56, 168.

[78] Letter, Barbara K. Lawson to Paula Dominique, October 31, 1981, Folder 2 "Barbara Lawson: Correspondence, 1980-81," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[79] Memo, C. Richard Parkins to John Cannon, November 16, 1981, Folder 5 "Gastón A. Fernández: Consolidation, 1980," Box 1, Fort Chaffee Collection, CHC.

[80] Associated Press, "U.S. haste on refugees cost millions, insiders say."

---

[81] Mary Thornton, "Cubans Bound for Montana," *Washington Post*, December 19, 1981; "Politics Key to the Fate Of Camp's Last Cubans."

[82] United Press International, "Move to Montana Expensive Whim," January 2, 1982, accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.upi.com/Archives/1982/01/02/Move-to-Montana-expensive-whim/5780378795600/; Douglas B. Feaver, "Savings and More Savings," *Washington Post*, January 12, 1982.

[83] Associated Press, "Cubans in Arkansas Will Be Transferred To 2 Federal Prisons," *New York Times*, January 22, 1982.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

When stories are told about Mariel, if detention is mentioned at all, the starting point is often the place where this thesis ends. According to most accounts, Cubans were detained indefinitely in the U.S. *because* Fidel Castro refused to take them back. It was a foreign policy matter—part of Castro's cynical scheme to put one over on the U.S. by sending "criminals" and "mentals." It is true that the Cubans in the Atlanta Penitentiary and other federal prisons would have been deported were it not for the refusal of the Cuban government to accept their return. But the international relations angle does not explain why these particular Cubans were detained in the first place. Although Castro contributed significantly to the construction of Mariel migrants as "undesirables," blaming him does nothing to explain how thousands of people ended up in makeshift detention centers for months and sometimes years. Moreover, the relationship between Cuba and the U.S. utterly fails to account for the fact that a disproportionate number of the people detained were black and *mulato*. In the cases of the "excludables" and the 'leftovers' at Fort Chaffee who did go to federal prisons, an analysis of Cold War foreign policy provides almost no insight into how they actually ended up in those spaces, or why most of them were not white. The aim of this thesis, therefore, has been to demonstrate *how* race and power were intertwined in the lives of people from Mariel and to explain *why* the weight of the Carter administration's ad hoc detention system fell most heavily on people with darker skin.

This study has offered a fine-grained account of the year-and-a-half following the Mariel boatlift in order to illustrate the process of digestion—as one Cuban-Haitian Task Force official described it—that overtook the incoming migrants. The INS sent those who did not have family members in south Florida and those who had spent time in Cuban prisons to "camps" on military bases around the United States. As a result of earlier patterns of Cuban migration and historical structures of wealth on the island, black and *mulato* Mariel migrants were far less likely than their white counterparts to have family members in the Miami area. In Cuba, young men with darker skin faced more intensive policing than their lighter compatriots; they were more likely to serve time for violating vague statutes that were selectively enforced. North of the Straits of Florida, the Carter administration understood that it risked less political fallout if it detained only those migrants who had no connections to the Cuban establishment in Miami. The White House developed its policy accordingly, and a disproportionate number of black and *mulato* people from Mariel were locked up. Unlike Haitians who arrived at the same time, darker-skinned Cubans had no outspoken advocates in south Florida or in Congress.

The tendency for people in the U.S. to racialize Cubans simply as Latins or Hispanics helped obscure the ways that blackness and whiteness affected what occurred inside the detention centers. Yet skin tone continued to affect what happened in these new carceral spaces. The governance of the "camps" drew on both humanitarian and punitive impulses. A web of power structures and disciplinary forces emerged, and some Mariel migrants pursued strategies of accommodation, while others took advantage of their predicament or found ways to resist. In the end, the various forms of power at work inside and outside the detention centers again contributed to highly racialized consequences. Black and *mulato* Cubans were more vulnerable than white Cubans to the inertia of indefinite detention. A set of ostensibly race-neutral policies and practices thus formed the scaffolding for an undeniably racial project of incarceration.

A similarly intensive study will be necessary to gain insight into the continued imprisonment of Mariel migrants over the course of the 1980s. From the moment they arrived in Key West, Cubans who admitted that they had spent time in prisons on the island were sent to federal correctional institutions in Miami and Talladega, Alabama. Over the course of the next year, nearly 1,800 people from Mariel were locked away in such institutions. Many of them were imprisoned for acts that would not have been illegal in the United States.[1] Some were involved in the "riots" at Fort Chaffee and Fort Indiantown Gap. Some committed misdemeanors or felonies after arriving in the United States, either in the detention centers or on the outside. And hundreds simply lacked the proper INS paperwork.[2] To an even greater extent than the Cubans in the Carter administration's detention centers, the Cubans in prisons were victims of brutal character assassinations. R.R. Frechette, director of the State Department's Office of Cuban Affairs, once suggested that virtually all of the incarcerated Mariel migrants had confessed to crimes such as "murder, rape, and arson."[3] Although several studies serve as excellent starting points, previous scholarship has not centered race or offered the sort of detailed analysis necessary to understand how thousands of predominately black and *mulato* Cubans came to reside in U.S. prisons.[4]

The detention of Cubans from Mariel had far-reaching consequences for the development of a U.S. migrant detention infrastructure. As historian Kristina Shull has recently noted, the policies adopted in the aftermath of the Mariel boatlift paved the way for “a more permanent immigration detention system.” Shull attributes this “new departure in U.S. immigration policy” to the Reagan administration and a “resurgent nationalism” across the country.[5] Although the Reagan administration oversaw much of this buildup, including the construction of an INS detention center in western Louisiana that would later hold some 1,000 Mariel Cubans, it was the Carter administration that reinitiated large-scale migrant detention in the United States.[6] Liberals Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter were the ones responsible for using state muscle to develop heavily guarded and militarized detention centers. The Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy established under Carter, not Reagan’s Task Force by the same name, was the body that first called for additional funding to imprison more migrants and build a permanent detention site for asylum seekers.[7] The criminalization of Mariel migrants—and the distribution of resources and organization of space along racial lines—came about under liberal administrations.[8] Jimmy Carter may have infused this racial project with humanitarian rhetoric, but it did little to change the result. That result, however, did not stem from some some nebulous racist conspiracy. Rather, the long-term detention of black and *mulato* Cubans reflected historical structures and countless decisions and non-decisions, which combined to create a racist impact.

---

[1] Willard P. Rose, "Some Refugees Are Imprisoned Without Crimes," *Miami Herald*, December 21, 1980.
[2] Art Harris, "Judge Set to Release 322 Cubans," *Washington Post*, August 18, 1981; "CHTF Director's Briefing Materials for the Senate Appropriations Committee Hearings Held During the Week of March 2, 1981," March 1981, Folder "Hearing Transcript and Briefing Books [1]," Box 4, CHTF.
[3] Fred Mares, "KC lawyers seek release of all Cubans," *Kansas City Times*, January 9, 1981, Folder "Correspondence Selected for Standard Language Response [3]," Box 20, CHTF.
[4] Smith, "The Cuban Detainee Uprising and Riot at the Atlanta Penitentiary November 23, 1987"; Hamm, *The Abandoned Ones*.

In Miami, Mariel no longer represents what it once did. Although many now remember the boatlift as a turning point for Cubans in the city, its meaning has evolved. The “Scarface Legacy” still contributes to the notion that some of the 1980 arrivals were hustlers and hit men, but the idea of their "undesirability" has faded. Even the name used to disparage Cubans who landed in Key West that summer began to resonate in new ways, as some *marielitos* started using the term for themselves. Historian María Cristina García has suggested that Mariel migrants "forced the more established emigrés to redefine what it meant to be a Cuban in a country other than Cuba."[9] The boatlift threw into crisis the myth of the "Cuban success story," as earlier exiles and migrants faced the arrival of a group of Cubans who resembled more closely the population of the island. After first seeking to distance themselves, García writes, established Cubans eventually "developed a grudging respect for their compatriots" from Mariel.[10]

---

[5] Shull, “‘Nobody Wants These People’: Reagan’s Immigration Crisis and the Containment of Foreign Bodies,” 257, 259.

[6] This was not the first time in U.S. history, of course, that permanent or semi-permanent facilities were used to detain migrants. Ellis Island was a migrant detention center for much of its 62-year history. In the case of Japanese “internment camps” during World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt oversaw the detention of both migrants *and* citizens.

[7] Guillermo Martinez, “Immigration Commission will propose detention camps for future refugees,” *Miami Herald*, February 9, 1981.

[8] See the definition of “racial project,” in Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 125.

News stories marking the various anniversaries of the boatlift attest to this shift. Thirty years later, *El Nuevo Herald* ran an article with the headline, "*El Mariel cambió la historia de Miami*" ("Mariel changed the history of Miami"), in which city officials reflected on their experiences in 1980. Former mayor Maurice Ferré told *El Nuevo Herald* that Mariel was "very bad at first, but very good in the end," because "most of these people were honest, decent, and hard-working" and now they are "doctors, bankers, business people and really bettered the community."[11] What is not visible on the surface of this tremendous change in the perception of Mariel migrants is the mechanism by which it occurred. To get from the "Cuban success story" to the "Cuban success story 2.0," older exiles and migrants in south Florida had to reconfigure the original myth. The path of least resistance was neglect. By ignoring the people who spent years in detention centers and prisons, as many subsequent accounts of Mariel have, it was easier to focus on the "doctors, bankers, business people" who could reconstitute the story of "success." Indeed, the overwhelming majority of Mariel migrants were able to begin new lives in the United

---

[9] García, *Havana USA*, 115.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Alfonso Chardy, "El Mariel Cambió La Historia de Miami," *El Nuevo Herald*, April 24, 2010. Translations are the author's.

States without having to face long periods of confinement. Yet the stories of those who were not afforded that possibility convey much more about the ways race and power shaped the carceral landscapes of both Cuba and the United States. The bulk of their stories remains to be told.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aguirre, B. E., Rogelio Sáenz, and Brian Sinclair James. "Marielitos Ten Years Later: The Scarface Legacy." *Social Science Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (1997): 487–507.

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press, 2010.

Bach, Robert L., Jennifer B. Bach, and Timothy Triplett. "The Flotilla 'Entrants': Latest and Most Controversial." *Cuban Studies* 11, no. 2 (1981): 29–48.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. 4th ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

———. *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. Boulder, CO: L. Rienner, 2001.

Bon Tempo, Carl J. *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.

Boswell, Thomas D. "Racial and Ethnic Change and Hispanic Residential Segregation Patterns in Metropolitan Miami, 1980." LACC Occasional Papers Series, Dialogue #81. Florida International University, 1987. http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/laccopsd/58.

Bronfman, Alejandra. *Measures of Equality: Social Science, Citizenship, and Race in Cuba, 1902-1940*. Envisioning Cuba. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Calavita, Kitty. *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Capó, Jr., Julio. "Queering Mariel: Mediating Cold War Foreign Policy and U.S. Citizenship among Cuba's Homosexual Exile Community, 1978–1994." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 29, no. 4 (2010): 78.

Chomsky, Aviva. *Undocumented: How Immigration Became Illegal*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2014.

Clark, Juan M. "The Exodus from Revolutionary Cuba (1959-1974): A Sociological Analysis." PhD dissertation, University of Florida, 1975.

Connolly, N. D. B. *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

———. “Timely Innovations: Planes, Trains and the ‘Whites Only’ Economy of a Pan-American City.” *Urban History* 36, no. 2 (August 2009): 243–61.

de la Fuente, Alejandro. *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

del Castillo, Siro. Interview with Alexander Stephens, October 29, 2015.

Dixon, Heriberto. “The Cuban-American Counterpoint: Black Cubans in the United States.” *Dialectical Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (1988): 227–39.

Dow, Mark. *American Gulag: Inside U.S. Immigration Prisons*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Duany, Jorge. “Cuban Communities in the United States: Migration Waves, Settlement Patterns and Socioeconomic Diversity.” *Pouvoirs Dans La Caraïbe* 11 (1999): 69–103.

Edsall, Thomas B., and Mary D. Edsall. *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*. New York: Norton, 1991.

Fagen, Richard R., Richard A. Brody, and Thomas J. O’Leary. *Cubans in Exile: Disaffection and the Revolution*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968.

Fernández, Gastón A. “Race, Gender, and Class in the Persistence of the Mariel Stigma Twenty Years after the Exodus from Cuba.” *International Migration Review* 41, no. 3 (2007): 602–22.

———. *The Mariel Exodus Twenty Years Later: A Study on the Politics of Stigma and a Research Bibliography*. Miami: Ediciones Universal, 2002.

Ferrer, Ada. *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868-1898*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 1st American ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

Gamarra, Eduardo. Interview with Alexander Stephens, November 2, 2015.

Garcia, Alyssa. “Situating Race, Navigating Belongings: Mapping Afro-Cuban Identities in the United States.” *Latino(a) Research Review* 7, no. 1/2 (2008): 59–90.

García, María Cristina. *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

García-Peña, Lorgia. "Translating Blackness: Dominicans Negotiating Race and Belonging." *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* 45, no. 2 (2015): 10–20.

Gerstle, Gary. *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Gibbs, Nancy, and Michael Duffy. *The Presidents Club: Inside the World's Most Exclusive Fraternity*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013.

Girard, Philippe R. *Clinton in Haiti: The 1994 U.S. Invasion of Haiti*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Gottschalk, Marie. *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Greenbaum, Susan D. *More than Black: Afro-Cubans in Tampa*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002.

Grenier, Guillermo J., and Lisandro Pérez. *The Legacy of Exile: Cubans in the United States*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003.

Hamm, Mark S. *The Abandoned Ones: The Imprisonment and Uprising of the Mariel Boat People*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995.

Haney-López, Ian. *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*. Rev. ed. New York: New York University Press, 2006.

Hawk, Kate Dupes, Ron Villella, and Adolfo Leyva de Varona. *Florida and the Mariel Boatlift of 1980: The First Twenty Days*. Edited by Kristen Cifers. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2014.

Helg, Aline. *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.

Hernandez, Kelly Lytle. *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.

Hinton, Elizabeth. "'A War within Our Own Boundaries': Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the Rise of the Carceral State." *Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (June 2015): 100–112.

Hufker, Brian, and Gray Cavender. "From Freedom Flotilla to America's Burden: The Social Construction of the Mariel Immigrants." *Sociological Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (June 1990): 321–35.

Inda, Jonathan Xavier. “Performativity, Materiality, and the Racial Body.” *Latino Studies Journal* 11, no. 3 (2000): 74–99.

Jiménez Román, Miriam, and Juan Flores, eds. *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Kahn, Robert S. *Other People’s Blood: U.S. Immigration Prisons in the Reagan Decade*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996.

Koulish, Robert E. *Immigration and American Democracy: Subverting the Rule of Law*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Lipman, Jana K. “A Refugee Camp in America: Fort Chaffee and Vietnamese and Cuban Refugees, 1975-1982.” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 33, no. 2 (2014): 57.

———. “The Fish Trusts the Water, and It Is in the Water That It Is Cooked.” *Radical History Review*, no. 115 (Winter 2013): 115.

López, Gustavo, and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera. “Afro-Latino: A Deeply Rooted Identity among U.S. Hispanics.” *Pew Research Center*, March 1, 2016. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/01/afro-latino-a-deeply-rooted-identity-among-u-s-hispanics/.

Martinez Jr., Ramiro, Amie L. Nielsen, and Matthew T. Lee. “Reconsidering the Marielito Legacy: Race/Ethnicity, Nativity, and Homicide Motives.” *Social Science Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2003): 397–411.

Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Translated by Daniel De Leon. Chicago: Kerr & Co., 1907.

Masud-Piloto, Felix Roberto. *From Welcomed Exiles to Illegal Immigrants: Cuban Migration to the U.S., 1959-1995*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996.

McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Mirabal, Nancy Raquel. “‘Ser de Aquí’: Beyond the Cuban Exile Model.” *Latino Studies* 1, no. 3 (November 2003): 366–82.

Molina, Natalia. *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

Moloney, Deirdre M. *National Insecurities: Immigrants and U.S. Deportation Policy since 1882*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

Muhammad, Khalil Gibran. *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Murakawa, Naomi. *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Ojito, Mirta. “Best of Friends, Worlds Apart.” *New York Times*, June 5, 2000, sec. U.S. http://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/05/us/best-of-friends-worlds-apart.html.

Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Pedraza, Silvia. “Los Marielitos of 1980: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality,” 14:89–102. Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 2004.

———. *Political Disaffection in Cuba’s Revolution and Exodus*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Peña, Susana. “‘Obvious Gays’ and the State Gaze: Cuban Gay Visibility and U.S. Immigration Policy during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. No. 3 (July 2007).

Pérez, Lisandro. “Cubans in the United States.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 487 (1986): 126–37.

———. “Immigrant Economic Adjustment and Family Organization: The Cuban Success Story Reexamined.” *International Migration Review* 20, no. 1 (1986): 4–20.

Pérez, Louis A. “Cubans in Tampa: From Exiles to Immigrants, 1892-1901.” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (1978): 129–40.

Portes, Alejandro, Juan M. Clark, Manuel M. López, and Eleanor Meyer Rogg. “Six Years Later, the Process of Incorporation of Cuban Exiles in the United States: 1973-1979.” *Cuban Studies* 11, no. 2 (July 1981): 1–24.

Portes, Alejandro, and Steven Shafer. “Revisiting the Enclave Hypothesis: Miami Twenty-Five Years Later.” *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 25 (November 2007): 157–90.

Portes, Alejandro, and Alex Stepick. *City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Poyo, Gerald E. *With All, and for the Good of All: The Emergence of Popular Nationalism in the Cuban Communities of the United States, 1848-1898*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989.

Prieto, Yolanda. *The Cubans of Union City: Immigrants and Exiles in a New Jersey Community*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009.

Rodríguez-Silva, Ileana M. *Silencing Race: Disentangling Blackness, Colonialism, and National Identities in Puerto Rico*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Roediger, David R. *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White*. New York: Basic Books, 2006.

Shull, Kristina. "'Nobody Wants These People': Reagan's Immigration Crisis and the Containment of Foreign Bodies." In *Body and Nation: The Global Realm of U.S. Body Politics in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Emily S. Rosenberg and Shanon Fitzpatrick. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.

Sierra Madero, Abel. "¡Que Se Vayan! Actos de Repudio, Nacionalismo Y Sexualidad En Cuba Durante El Éxodo Del Mariel." Paper presented at the Florida International University, symposium *The Mariel Exodus, 35 Years Later: Impacts in the U.S. and Cuba*, Miami, FL, October 2015.

Skop, Emily H. "Race and Place in the Adaptation of Mariel Exiles." *International Migration Review* 35, no. 2 (2001): 449–71.

Smith, Renaldo. "The Cuban Detainee Uprising and Riot at the Atlanta Penitentiary November 23, 1987." MA thesis, Atlanta University Center, 1988. http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/dissertations/1690.

Smith, Robert Charles. *Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Now You See It, Now You Don't*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

Stabile, Carol A. *White Victims, Black Villains: Gender, Race and Crime News in US Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Tichenor, Daniel J. *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Torres, María de los Angeles. *In the Land of Mirrors: Cuban Exile Politics in the United States*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995.

Walsh, Daniel C. *An Air War with Cuba: The United States Radio Campaign against Castro*. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011.

Wasem, Ruth Ellen. "Cuban Migration to the United States: Policy and Trends." CRS Report for Congress. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 2, 2009.

Zavodny, Madeline. “Race, Wages, and Assimilation among Cuban Immigrants.” *Population Research and Policy Review* 22, no. 3 (2003): 201–19.

Zolberg, Aristide R. *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006.