RACE, IMMIGRATION, GENDER, AND THE POLITICS OF EXCLUSION

Race and the 1980 Mariel Exodus in Wisconsin

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This article discusses individual and collective experiences of trauma and racial discrimination within the context of the Mariel exodus resettlement camps. From May 1980 until February 1982, more than 60,000 Mariel migrants were detained at several US military bases across the country, as they awaited screening by the US Federal Government and the generosity of potential American sponsors. This period of delayed military detention was a pivotal point in the reconfiguration of the Black Cuban-American community, as the majority of Mariel migrants at these resettlement camps were lower-class, Black, or mixed-race young men, who were faced with the harsh realities of a new racialized identity in the US. Focusing on a study of the resettlement camp located in Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, the article uses oral histories to illustrate the negative impact of bureaucratic immigration policies, military policing, inflammatory media reporting, and racial discrimination on the resettlement experiences of a community of Black Mariel refugees in Wisconsin.

Keywords: Mariel; Camps; Refugees; Detention; Cuban; 1980; Fort McCoy; Race

Ernesto Rodríguez Cruz is likely the only Black, 65-year-old fan of the Green Bay Packers who has a tattoo of the island of Cuba on his forearm. Erne, as we call him, came to the United States from Cuba in 1980 with the Mariel exodus and has spent the last 41 years living in La Crosse, in Wisconsin, a cold Midwestern town of approximately 60,000 people located on the Mississippi River, right on the border with Minnesota. Erne has alternated jobs between the meat canning industry in Austin, MN (where Hormel Foods makes Spam) and working as a handyman. He has three biracial children and several grandchildren living on the other side of the river, but he chooses to live in La Crosse, with his roommate Rodobaldo Pozo, or “Niño,” a 63-year-old Cuban Rasta and Erne’s “brother” from the correctional facility where they spent time together as young men in their native Camagüey.

Erne’s home is the hub of a resilient Cuban community of Mariel refugees living in La Crosse and the nearby towns of Sparta, Tomah, and Arcadia, and the cities of Madison, Milwaukee, Minneapolis and Rochester, MN. These Cubans were among the more than 14,000 “Marielitos” who were sent to an improvised refugee resettlement camp at Fort McCoy, at the time an Army Reserve and National Guard training base just 40 miles east of La Crosse. Neighbors—and often police officers—are regularly amused by the loud drums coming from Erne’s place. As we come in, a chaos of Walmart mangos, framed Cuban maps, tube deodorant, *tumbadoras*, and terrible *pepito* jokes attempt to take me back to the Cuba of the 1970s until I realize I am not old enough to remember it.

We are then joined by neighbors Marta and Jesús, a retired, Black Cuban couple who pride themselves on 34 years of service to the Downtown La Crosse Radisson, and their eight biracial grandchildren. Here too are Tomás Consuegra, Erne’s “white brother” from prison in Camagüey; Tony (a Cuban version of Willie Nelson); and Marcos Calderón, a retired Cuban bus driver and history buff, all of whom often, like today, come over to warm themselves up eating *ajiaco*, scream about Trump politics, but mostly check on each other. I can’t stop thinking about how these Mariel Cubans have made sense of their own world in Wisconsin. To me, every object and sound around us is a symbol, every dated joke is a gesture of resistance to the oppression of racial discrimination and exile. “Blood is thicker than water,” whispers my American colleague who has come along for the interviews.

Mariel Refugee Rodobaldo Pozo (Niño) at home in La Crosse, Wisconsin, April 2021.
Courtesy of the author.

Since 2017, most of my work as a researcher has focused on advocating for the legal, social, and civic rights of this Mariel community through our public scholarship. Erne and the rest of the Mariel community near La Crosse have opened all the doors for their stories to reemerge from oblivion and discrimination. We have published and presented our work nationally and internationally, and, as I write this piece, we are completing an eight-episode podcast series entitled, *Uprooted: Cuban in Wisconsin*, about Fort McCoy and the Mariel exodus for Wisconsin Public Radio which will air in January of 2022. The La Crosse Mariel group also has volunteered their time to participate as guest speakers in panels that since 2018 have accompanied the travelling exhibit, *Uprooted: The 1980 Cuban Refugee Program at Fort McCoy*, which we curated together to feature over 100 photographs, artifacts, and other memorabilia collected from various archives and received as donations from the protagonists at Fort McCoy.

This essay delves into the history of Fort McCoy as a Mariel refugee resettlement camp, where a large majority of Black and mixed-raced refugees were detained for several months during the summer of 1980. I share here some of our experiences and interviews during the process of creating the *Uprooted* exhibit as well as recording oral histories for our WPR project, as a way to trace individual and collective experiences of trauma and racial discrimination within the context of the Mariel camps beyond the Spanish-speaking enclaves of South Florida.

The impact of the time spent by Black Mariel migrants in these detention facilities beyond South Florida remains largely overlooked by the Mariel bibliography. As Alexander Stephens has keenly pointed out, the discussion on race in the literature of Mariel (and its aftermath) has been dominated by social scientists who have approached race from the logic of adaptation into American society rather than as an element of cultural identity or a discriminatory construct in structures of white privilege.¹ Most of the historical fiction around Mariel, on the other hand, has been written by either white, upper- and middle-class, Cuban-American

¹ In my view, Stephens has authored one of the most complete and critical accounts of all of the Mariel resettlement camps in his 2016 M.A. thesis at the University of Georgia. Please see: Stephens, *I Hope They Don't Come to Plains: Race and the Detention of Mariel Cubans, 1980–1981*.

Mariel protagonists, or white American authors who were involved in the events of the boatlift. Similarly, Mariel-exiled intellectuals (such as those who grouped around the journal *Mariel* in the early 1980s) focused on vindicating the image of a persecuted, selected circle of artists. All these narratives succeeded in merging autobiographical memories with documented history to depict the commotion and horrors of Mariel, as well as detailing the crucial ways in which the Cuban American community came to the rescue of Mariel migrants. However, they have largely ignored Black Mariel experiences, significantly reinforcing the invisibility of Black and mixed-race Mariel subjects in the memory and cultural maps of the Mariel exodus.

Other, more recent public scholarship on Mariel such as José Manuel García's *Voices of Mariel: Oral Histories of the 1980 Cuban Boatlift* (2018)—a book based on a 2011 documentary film of the same title—has collected some of the testimonies of Mariel migrants in the detention camps. Still, four decades after the exodus, the predominant intention of the twenty interviews included in this text is to underscore the moral, intellectual, and economic worth of white Mariel refugees. In the preface, García describes Mariel migrants as “a diverse group of people from various social, religious, and professional backgrounds,” but no testimony by a Black Mariel migrant is included in the book (xiii).

Whether the failure to document Black experiences in the Mariel exodus could be understood as academic oblivion, reluctance, or hereditary racial bias from pre-revolutionary Cuba or the colorblind racism of the Cuban revolution, it can be attributed mostly to the ways in which a discourse of criminality has been associated with Blackness in the Cuban transnational community. There is ample evidence of the fact that, due to the association of social class and race in Cuba before 1959, most Cuban exiles living in the US before the Mariel exodus were white or light-skinned. Moreover, they could also pass for white in the US to navigate American racism. Ironically, this claim to American whiteness in Cuban America became a normative expectation also for Mariel migrants, a group in which approximately 40% self-identified as Black or mixed-race.² They were also the first large group of Cuban migrants who, for the most part, had no recollection of racial relations in prerevolutionary Cuba and had reached adulthood under the colorblind racial discourse of the Cuban revolution.

From left to right: Rodobaldo Pozo (Niño), Tomás Consuegra and Marcos Calderón travel with the exhibit *Uprooted: The Refugee Program at Fort McCoy*. Monroe County Historical Society, Sparta, WI. February 2020. Courtesy of the author.

² See Fernández, p. 605.

At the same time that Mariel exploded, a large number of Haitian migrants had been arriving regularly at the shores of Florida. The Carter Administration declared this situation an emergency on May 6, 1980, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) began to coordinate the federal effort to respond to the crisis. FEMA, however, had been created only a year before, on April 1, 1979, by consolidating several federal disaster management agencies, and its personnel had limited experience dealing with a human migration crisis. On July 15, 1980, the Carter administration established the Cuban-Haitian Immigration Task Force (CHITF), which took over the planning and management of a system of processing centers that had been opened for Cubans and Haitians.

The camps for Mariel migrants were gradually opened at four military bases across the US: Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania, and Fort McCoy, in Wisconsin. These facilities began to house Mariel migrants as early as May 3, 1980 with tents set up at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. Fort Chaffee, in Arkansas (May 8) was the next detention center to open and as the refugee population at Chaffee neared capacity, new Mariel arrivals were sent to Fort Indiantown Gap, in Pennsylvania (May 17), and Fort McCoy, in Wisconsin (May 30). By mid-June of 1980, over 62,000 Cubans (almost half of all Mariel migrants) were in these camps.³

Alison Mountz and Jenna Loyd have seen the creation of the Mariel exodus processing and resettlement centers as a foundational step towards the militarization of immigration detention in the US. As they have suggested, it became evident that the work of the CHITF in setting up the camps had considered the emergency confinement for Cubans and Haitians but also made careful plans for longer-term militarized detention facilities to contain future mass migrations. The search for these military locations particularly underscored remoteness as key criteria:

Deterrence took many forms, from interception and return of migrants at sea, to mass detention in remote and hostile locations across the United States. From islands to bases, authorities overlooked no corner of mainland territory in their efforts to deter through detention. In spite of harsh criticism and references to Siberian, Gulag geographies, the government pursued remote geography as a deterrence strategy. Remoteness came into play repeatedly and carried with it creative legal geographies—such as declarations of nonentry—with clear consequences for detained asylum seekers and their advocates and legal counsel. (Mountz and Loyd 82)

The Carter administration feared that granting automatic political refugee status to Cuban Mariel migrants would encourage similar mass migrations from other countries in the Caribbean and Central and South America. The US Refugee Act of 1980 had come into effect just one month before Mariel started, on March 17, 1980, and the language included in the act granted refugee status to the Cubans. However, the annual limit of Cuban immigrants specified by the Act (only 5,000) was not enough for the massive Mariel numbers. The Carter Administration then argued that most Mariel migrants—except those at the Peruvian Embassy—were not in an emergency refugee situation or enduring persecution in Cuba but were instead motivated to migrate by economic reasons.⁴

In her analysis of the Mariel camp set up at Fort Chaffee, in Arkansas, Jana Lipman explains how the US government then crafted the immigration label that justified the detention of Mariel migrants:

The United States engaged in even greater linguistic gymnastics with the 1980 Cuban population. Rather than designating this group as “parolees” or as refugees (constitutive of the 1980 Refugee Act), the U.S. government created the legal category of “Cuban/Haitian entrant (status pending).” Congress soon passed legislation granting Cuban entrants the same state benefits as refugees; however, the “entrant” designation still made it easier for the government to begin exclusion proceedings, whereby it could deport people who “had been admitted physically, but not legally, into the country. (60)

At the time, there was no real provision in the law for the “entrant-status pending” label, and the federal funding for health care, education, and general welfare of the Cuban refugees came from the allocated budgets of federal, state, and local agencies. As a result, the majority of the costs of resettlement for Cuban refugees was put onto the shoulders of state governments, which brought significant public resentment of the Mariel migrants.⁵

³ See Aguirre p. 159.

⁴ 3500 of the Cubans in the Peruvian Embassy in Havana had received immediate refugee status. See Aguirre p. 165–166.

⁵ See Aguirre, p. 169.

Mariel migrant Gerardo Rodríguez receiving his Social Security Card at Fort McCoy.
Special Collections Archive at Murphy Library, University of Wisconsin La Crosse.

Upon their arrival at the camps, Mariel “entrants” were assigned an alien number and given a camp ID card, and they were asked to choose a voluntary agency (VOLAGS) from a list to help them find a sponsor. At Fort McCoy, these were organizations such as the United States Catholic Conference and several other Wisconsin-based branches of similar groups about which Cubans had limited information. This naturally made their selection of a VOLAG rather arbitrary. The U.S. government paid a commission to VOLAGS for each Cuban resettled. A lengthy immigration screening process then required Cubans to be fingerprinted and to file a formal request with the INS to reside in the US. Clearances for domestic US security were required, involving officials from the INS, the FBI, the CIA, and the State Department.

This security clearance step was complicated by the inaccuracy or dubious authenticity of the limited records that the Cuban government had provided on Mariel migrants. INS and FBI agents would interrogate Cubans about alleged crimes committed in Cuba, which in the majority of cases did not translate accurately to the meaning of such crimes in the US. Only approximately 7 % of all Mariel migrants were suspected to be hardened criminals and 84% had no criminal records.⁶ Offenses recorded in Cuba such as money embezzlement or fraud, illegal gambling, racketeering of rationed commodities, minor drug possession (mostly marijuana), homosexuality, “indecent” or “dangerous” public behavior, prostitution or pimping were all deemed as threatening to the security of the Cuban state. Having been a member of the Communist Party or any of the many other revolutionary organizations (which was unavoidable for most Cubans) also would cause delays in the security clearance.

Most Cubans had difficulties understanding the bureaucratic methods in place at the camp, which were poorly explained to the migrants. Resettlement could take anywhere from one day to fifty days for Cubans

⁶ See Aguirre, p. 167.

who had identified relatives to sponsor them.⁷ A medical clearance from the Public Health Service (PHS) stationed at the compounds was also required, which necessitated waiting for the results of blood testing and x-rays for respiratory and contagious diseases. In Wisconsin, refugee intake was assisted by interpreters who were mainly area college and high school students with rudimentary Spanish and who were not required to pass language proficiency exams. This caused numerous errors such as the misspelling of names and the mis-categorization of the Cuban migrants.

More importantly, in order to exit Fort McCoy under the category of “entrant-status pending,” Cubans in Wisconsin needed to secure sponsors who would agree to help the migrants resettle in the community. The VOLAGS that Cubans had chosen would try to contact any existing relatives in the US or to find American sponsors in Wisconsin. However, most Black and homosexual Cubans had ventured out of the island unexpectedly or had been forced or misled by the Cuban government to join the boatlift. They had no relatives in the US, and the “entrant-status pending” designation put them in the grim spot of being paroled out of the camps only under a sponsor who was yet to be found.

Fort McCoy had been prepared on extremely short notice for the arrival of 25,000 Cubans, but the Mariel port in Cuba was closed before the camp reached that capacity. The camp opened on May 30 with 121 old War World II barracks and 40 mess halls ready to house Cubans who were part of the last groups coming out of Mariel. By June 23, the Cuban population at Fort McCoy had peaked at 13,413. Almost 90% of that population was male, aged 25–35, and with no English skills. An average of 900 army personnel and 1500 temporary civilians worked at the base.

A total of 145 unaccompanied minors (between the ages of 14–18) were at Fort McCoy. Only 4 were women, only 46 had completed 10th grade, and 116 had been detained in Cuba at some point. 46 of those minors had come directly from juvenile detention centers in Cuba. As “entrants,” also with a pending immigration status, Cuban unaccompanied minors could not be legally adopted. According to Elizabeth Tans, then the coordinator for the Children’s Services Society of Wisconsin, their custody was awarded to the INS, and their guardianship was transferred to the State of Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services.

Being the last camp of the four Mariel resettlement centers to open, Fort McCoy officials had learned from the experiences of unrest that Fort Chafee and Fort Indiantown Gap had seen. FEMA authorities heightened the security in the Wisconsin camp and provided plenty of opportunities for entertainment for the Cubans. Board games and sports equipment were widely available, principally from the Red Cross; films were projected nightly; and vocational instruction, English and American society lessons, and religious services were offered for the refugees.

Erne tells me that Fort McCoy gave him an opportunity to recover years lost in Cuba. Back in his native Camagüey, he had been summoned to the *Servicio Militar General* and had ended up working 12-hour days at a sugar cane field for the Cuban army’s agricultural workforce, the *Ejército Juvenil del Trabajo* (EJT). Erne had received permission to attend his father’s funeral in Santa Cruz del Sur. He had stolen a bicycle from a neighborhood yard to return to his base when he was stopped by the police. He was sent to Kilo 7, Camagüey’s high-security prison, where he was confined for 11 months. When he was finally released, the Cuban government had assigned his father’s house to a new family. Homeless and unable to find work as a Black ex-convict, Erne began to rob state stores to survive. He was ultimately denounced by the *Comité de Defensa de la Revolución* and surrounded by the police at his girlfriend’s house. He pushed a police officer trying to escape and was sent back to Kilo 7 with a 44-year sentence. Erne had served 4 years in Kilo 7 when the Mariel port was opened. On June 2, at 1 a.m., Erne was put on a bus with no identification going to the Mariel port. For Erne, meeting a sponsor at Fort McCoy truly meant hope. At the camp he could play sports again, he worked in one of the kitchens, he enjoyed reading the news again, and he socialized often with American camp workers and interpreters. Living at Fort McCoy in the compounds designated for single males, however, also meant re-encountering the violence of Cuban prisons and defending himself against the extortion and abuse of a criminal minority.

Others, like our friend Marcos, had never been in jail in Cuba but had been convinced by friends to come in the Mariel Boatlift. They talk about Fort McCoy as a much more restricted and fenced space, with checkpoints and heavy military presence. As we listen to more oral testimonies of those months at Fort McCoy, we grow certain of the policing of bodies that took place in these compounds. Military police personnel were used inside the Wisconsin compound, but Department of Defense regulations did not give them authority

⁷ See Stephens, p. 69.

to use force or riot equipment. They could not arrest or interrogate Cubans, and could only patrol the compound areas. Still, families at Fort McCoy were separated and men and women also had separate designated areas, and while homosexual Mariel migrants often chose to separate themselves in their living areas, FEMA and camp officials also segregated gay Cubans when activities like dancing or cross-dressing were seen as disruptive acts.

In addition to a curfew and area limitations within the compound, Cubans were mandated a specific set of rules of behavior that required them to carry their camp ID at all times, and they were warned about “exhibiting oneself in an indecent manner,” which would result in reclusion in one of the improvised jails at Fort McCoy. According to these rules, Cubans at Fort McCoy should go to their barracks chief or “jefes” first if they encountered any problems.⁸ Fort McCoy Camp officials had decided on a subjective self-government approach, appointing what FEMA officials perceived as the more educated Cubans as area and barrack *jefes* (bosses), and allowed the creation of internal, refugee security forces.

These forms of coercion were sanctioned by FEMA administrators who failed to recognize the dynamics of power and fear which Cubans had brought with them from their experiences living under the Cuban state. Much like the revolutionary system of the *Comité de Defensa de la Revolución* (CDR), where neighbors were encouraged and authorized by the Cuban state to surveil each other, the pressure to denounce those who planned to escape, broke rules, or protested the delays in resettlement divided the refugee population at Fort McCoy. Violence at the detention camps was almost inevitable, as the cramped spaces of the compounds raised tensions and created opportunities for abuse. Old rivalries from Cuban prisons, or even Cuban neighborhoods, were also reproduced at Fort McCoy.

As Stephens details, imprisonment became a response measure when the order in Mariel resettlement camps was disrupted. The “entrant- status pending” INS categorization allowed the federal government to incarcerate Cubans to await deportation. Since the Cuban government refused to accept any Mariel migrants returning, any imprisoned Mariel Cuban faced indefinite time. By the end of September, over 1,700 Mariel migrants were in penal institutions. Cubans incarcerated for alleged misbehavior in their camps were at least half of this group.⁹

At Fort McCoy, the *jefes* enjoyed certain flexibility moving through the camp areas and received extra supplies. *Jefes* assisted with communication and any other barrack conflicts. They also worked supporting orderly distribution of food and supplies, and they monitored cultural events and sport competitions. More importantly, *jefes* would keep FEMA and camp officials informed about any dangers of disruptions or escape. While James Peterson, Director of Operations for FEMA, described the refugees’ internal organization as “indispensable”, some accusations of stabbings, extortion, and sexual abuse of minors ended up pointing at some *jefes* at Fort McCoy—as Sergio Fernández, a refugee leader, admitted to the press.¹⁰ On September 4, 1980, a fact-finding Commission charged by the Wisconsin Governor office echoed these concerns.¹¹

Juvenile refugees would escape or start altercations simply to call attention to the highly dysfunctional system implemented for their resettlement and safety.¹² This was confirmed in a special report by the *La Crosse Tribune* published five years later (in 1985), which told the story of Roberto Hernández, who had escaped from Fort McCoy along with fellow juvenile refugee, Eddy Guerra Pérez. The escape had been orchestrated with the help of one of the compound’s Army civil affairs officers, Looney Poole, who drove Roberto and Eddy to Sparta to be under the custody of a judge, since the officer had been frustrated by the delay of the sponsorship processes for the boys.¹³

Despite the surveillance and coercion at Fort McCoy, however, Cubans had been experts at navigating the bureaucracies and policing of the Cuban state for decades. Thus, Mariel migrants at Fort McCoy moved with relative ease from barrack to barrack, and a black market developed at the base (cigarettes, magazines, Cola-Cola cans, medical products, bed sheets, army blankets, clothing), moving products that Cubans could obtain from camp personnel by offering labor in camp maintenance tasks or simply bartering at the camp warehouses and health clinics. Cubans at the base could also make phone calls and receive money from relatives, which in part funded the black market.

⁸ See Stephens, p.73.

⁹ See Stephens, p.78.

¹⁰ See “Refugee leader criticizes judge.”

¹¹ See Tans, p. 272.

¹² See “Refugee leader criticizes judge.”

¹³ See “Aneurysm, red tape fail to break refugee’s spirit.”

Making coats out of military blankets at Fort McCoy. September 1980. Freedom Flotilla Collection. Special Collections Archive at Murphy Library, University of Wisconsin La Crosse.

John Satori currently owns La Crosse's antiques store Satori Arts. Satori had trained as a military dentist during the Vietnam War and worked at Fort McCoy as a dental assistant. He told us about refugees coming to the dental clinic to sell or trade their art for services. Satori would even commission artists and artisans living at the camp to do a piece in exchange for art supplies. Today, Satori has a collection of over 50 artifacts, which include paintings, crocheted bags, hats, uniforms, refugee letters, and other crafts. The paintings are particularly captivating as they depict religious images of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre and Santa Bárbara in bright colors, traditional Cuban landscapes, portraits of Fidel Castro as a refugee-eating monster, Mariel boats in their journey to Key West, and what refugees had imagined as their future lives in the US, with luxurious mansions and cars.

Drawing by Mariel Migrant Lázaro Humberto Peña Iglesias. 21 Feb. 2021.
Courtesy of Satori Arts and the author.

Each Mariel camp had a camp newsletter, which was edited and printed in coordination between FEMA camp officers and the US Civil Affairs Psychological Operations (CA/PSYOP) division in each compound. At Fort Chaffee the paper was *La Vida Nueva*, while Fort Indiantown Gap had *La Libertad*. At Fort McCoy the publication was *El Mercurio de McCoy*. These publications were bilingual, with improvised translations by camp volunteers and interpreters. They offered, for the most part, the combination of FEMA's intention to appease and educate refugees on immigration processing and, on the other hand, an officially-sanctioned refugee voice via editorials, cartoons, poems, and refugee stories in the camp.

In the case of *El Mercurio de McCoy*, the paper ran at Fort McCoy from June 3, 1980, until September 29 of the same year, with a total of 53 issues, organized into eight volumes, at an average of eight pages per issue. It was printed in two or sometimes three colors, with some black and white photographic images. Many issues of *El Mercurio* exhibit a strong theme of the US as a haven for oppressed refugees and focused on teaching Cubans about American history and culture or about their civic duties as future Americans. The paper also included daily English lessons and homework, sections on American geography, and basic health and common life advice, which, at times, revealed a condescending tone from American authorities towards the Cuban refugees.

UNA CARTA A LA COMUNIDAD CUBANA

Una Carta a la Comunidad Cubana

Se les ruega a nuestra querida comunidad cubana que mantengan orden y la paz dentro del campamento. Hemos pasado días difíciles desde que salimos de Cuba. Buscábamos la libertad y la paz y ambas cosas ya es posible lograrlas sin ningún impedimento. Recordemos a los seres queridos que dejamos en nuestra patria, que esperan de nuestra mejor actitud como una esperanza. Hasta ahora, hemos mantenido un clima de fe y esperanza en la solución de nuestro problema fundamental y no debemos quebrantar la armonía que ha reinado en nuestro campamento. Todos miran nuestra actitud y de ella depende nuestra salida. No nos unamos a nada ni a nadie que quiera crear climas de discordia o nos incite a violar las normas de paz de nuestra vida interna. Esto puede perjudicarnos y crear una mala imagen que no sea la real. Somos cubanos y por ende, hermanos de sufrimientos, en lo bueno y en lo malo, que ha sido más. Hemos estado juntos y así debemos seguir. Hay que demostrarle al mundo que somos hombres honestos y nuestro comportamiento depende de esto. Por eso, les rogamos una vez mas que mantengan la paz y el orden.

Muchas gracias, queridos hermanos y hermanas.

Roland Fabars Moya
Secretaria de
Protocol, Cultura
y Deporte

A Letter to the Cuban Community

To our beloved Cuban Community we make a plea to maintain order and peace within the compound. We have passed difficult days since we left Cuba. We sought liberty and peace. Both are possible to achieve. Let us remember the loved ones we left behind in our motherland who expect from us the best attitude as a symbol of their hope. Until now we have maintained an attitude of faith and hope in seeking a solution to our fundamental problem, and we should not destroy the harmony that has reigned in our camp. All eyes are on our attitude, and on this attitude depends our outprocessing. Let us not unite with anything or anyone who seeks to create a false image. We are Cubans and consequently brothers in our sufferings. Through the good, and the bad, which has abounded, we have remained united and in this way we should continue. We must show the world that we are honest men. This depends on our comportment. Because of this we once again make a plea to maintain peace and order.

Thank you very much beloved brothers and sisters.

Rolando Fabars Moya
Secretary of Protocol,
Culture, and Sports

According to Adolph Gundersen, one of the young volunteer translators working on *El Mercurio*, there was never a defined editorial policy or strategy for *El Mercurio* in terms of censorship or what content from outside should be published. As we review issues of *El Mercurio*, however, we notice that it generally ignored controversial events in the compounds and did not offer a space for refugee writers to criticize their delayed detention or FEMA's mismanagement of the camp or resettlements. Instead, *El Mercurio* published numerous editorials by both camp authorities and Cuban refugees that were aimed at appeasing Cubans, urging them to show gratitude to the Carter administration.

Roberto Cabrera Silva

Roberto Cabrera Silva, de 22 años, es un verdadero músico. En tres años, no solamente ha enseñado a sí mismo la guitarra sino ahora está dando lecciones de guitarra a un americano.

Roberto, quien ha escrito la música y la letra para varias canciones, también ha cantado desde su niñez. Su experiencia se extendió de actuar en programas de radio hasta entretener como miembro de un trio por unos cinco años.

Roberto espera continuar su educación y estudiar la guitarra después de empezar a trabajar.

Roberto Cabrera Silva

Roberto Cabrera Silva, age 22, is quite a musician. In three years' time, he not only has taught himself to play the guitar, he is presently giving guitar lessons to an American.

Roberto, who has written the lyrics and music for several songs, has also been singing since he was a small child. His experience ranges from singing on radio programs to providing entertainment as a member of a trio for five years.

Roberto hopes to continue his education and study guitar after he goes to work.

Antonio Montero Mayea

Antonio Montero Mayea, de 16 años, tiene su cinturón azul en judo. Era integrante del equipo de su provincia natal y después llegó a ser miembro del equipo de la Habana. Antonio dice que el equipo habanero es el mejor en Cuba y los miembros están seleccionados de competencias entre las provincias.

Antonio trabajaba de técnico de control de calidad. Inventarió la carga de los buques que llegaban a Cuba.

Antonio expresa el deseo de aprender bien el inglés, conseguir un trabajo y seguir compitiendo en judo.

Antonio Montero Mayea

Antonio Montero Mayea, age 16, is a blue belt in Judo. He was on the team in his province and later became a member of the Havana Team. Antonio states that the Havana Team is the best in Cuba and individuals were selected from contests between the provinces.

Antonio's profession in Cuba was quality control technician. He took inventory, etc. of cargo on incoming ships.

Antonio expresses the desire to become proficient in English, go to work and continue competing in Judo.

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El Mercurio also became a space for the reconfiguration of the racial logic of American society where Cuban racialized subjects were being vindicated. Cuban refugees who wrote and drew for *El Mercurio* implicitly exposed the discriminatory structures to which Mariel refugees were being subjected by the US government. As if these writers had been certain of the racial disparities that awaited Cubans outside Fort McCoy, they consistently featured positive profiles of Black "Marielitos". The profiles emphasized either a successful education in Cuba, an artistic or athletic talent, or a job skill newly acquired in the camp, and they always clarified any history of criminality in Cuba by explaining the unfairness of life under Castro. The profiles also detailed the future plans and hopes of Black refugees to succeed in American society. Other stories in *El Mercurio* highlighted positive interactions of Cubans with Americans during field trips, and the success of Cubans in sports competitions or cultural performances at nearby schools, churches, and communities. Among these were the performances of the camp's Afro-Cuban folkloric dance troupe at several university campuses in Wisconsin and Minnesota; as well as several refugee tryouts for the Milwaukee Brewers and the Minnesota Twins.

DEPORTES

Los Maratonistas - Dentro y Fuera del Campamento

En el área de refugio hay dos maratonistas con metas similares. José Urqueola Lao comenzó su carrera como maratonista durante su entrenamiento militar en Cuba. Fue subcampeón en los campeonatos nacionales y se hizo merecedor a un viaje para competir en México. Sin embargo, tuvo problemas políticos que le acarrearón un año de cárcel. Desde su arribo a este país, ha estado corriendo todos los días para tratar de acrecentar su fuerza vital, de manera que pueda desempeñarse en distancias maratónicas de 40 kms. También, ahora está recibiendo nutrición apropiada. Desea llegar a competir a nivel nacional y luego quiere convertirse en entrenador para ayudar a otros corredores.

El Mayor Lonnie Poole comenzó su carrera atlética en la secundaria en Louisville, Kentucky. Allí, se hizo merecedor a una beca en la Universidad de Furman en Carolina del Sur. En Furman, corrió bajo Jim Cairnes, quien es el entrenador olímpico de atletismo para 1980. El Mayor Poole entrenó cuatro horas al día en la universidad y compitió en carreras de 1.6 y 3.2 kms., como también en la competencia a campotravesía. Su agobiante entrenamiento para los olímpicos.

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Marathon Runners - Inside and Outside the Compound

In the refugee area are two marathon runners with similar goals. The Cuban refugee marathoner, Jose Urqueola Lao, started his running career while in Army training in Cuba. He was sub-champion in the Cuban National championships and earned a trip to Mexico to compete there. However, he had political problems and was put in jail for one year. Since coming to this country, he has been running every day, trying to build up his stamina to perform marathon distances of 26 miles. He is getting proper nutrition now and hopes to get to the national level in competition, then will become a coach to help other runners.

Maj. Lonnie Poole began his track career during high school in Louisville, Kentucky, and earned a scholarship to Furman University in South Carolina. At Furman, he trained with Jim Cairnes, the 1980 Olympic Track coach. In college, Maj. Poole trained 4 hours per day and competed in the one-mile, two-mile, and cross country races. In 1978, Maj. Poole started strenuous training to try out for the 1980 Olympic marathon team,

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Besides featuring these Black stories, *El Mercurio* underscored the interracial networks of solidarity that developed among Mariel migrants and camp personnel. The paper ran numerous stories about the growing friendships among refugees, volunteers, soldiers, and FEMA personnel, the subtext of which was often a narrative of interracial friendships between Black Cubans and white Americans. Although the paper circulated only within the restricted circle of the camp, these profiles and reports gave a voice to a community of Black Mariel subjects and attempted to offer a counternarrative to the inflammatory US press reports coming out of Fort McCoy.

The “Cuban/Haitian entrant-status pending” denomination merged Cubans and Haitians, overlapping the racial imaginaries that had separated the two groups in the perception of the American public. This association with Haitian migrants brought on strong racial prejudice against Mariel Cubans, since the US government, immigration authorities, and the American press often linked Haitians to poverty, desperation, laziness, dishonesty, weakness of character, and infectious diseases.¹⁴

The American press, in general, failed to challenge these racist narratives. Instead, as Lipman relates about the June 1980 refugee riots at Fort Chafee, media outlets across the nation publicized stirring images of the Mariel camps in which mostly Black young men appeared violent, destroying federal property.¹⁵ In West-Central Wisconsin, between 1980 and 1983, local press printed over 60 articles that conveyed a negative view of the Mariel migrants at Fort McCoy. Lillian Jacklin describes how the writing in these press pieces intersected refugees’ stories with national debates about sexual deviancy, criminality and violence, economic recession, the cost of refugee resettlement programs to taxpayers in the state, and public dissatisfaction with the Carter administration.¹⁶

The effects of this coverage became evident in the composition of the population remaining at Fort McCoy. At the beginning of September 1980, most families had left the camp, and approximately 4,500 unplaced Mariel refugees, mostly Black men, were left. At the conclusion of the overall resettlement efforts of the CHITF, 9,729 Cuban refugees had been sponsored out of Fort McCoy and 3,234 remained in the camp. These refugees were considered “hard cases” and were sent to Fort Chaffee, where a total of 5771 unplaced “Marielitos” from Eglin Air Force, Fort Indiantown Gap, and Fort Chafee were consolidated. According to Lipman, 86% of these “hard cases” at Chafee were male, 90% were between the ages of 20–30 and single, and 75% identified as “Black” or “mulatto”. Fort Chaffee stayed opened until February 1982, and when it finally closed down, the last 395 remaining refugees were sent to Federal penitentiaries in Atlanta.¹⁷

Wisconsin families who had considered opening their homes to Cubans turned reluctant when they learned that only young men, mostly Black, were available for placement. A story published by the *Miami Herald* in December 1980, titled “A Refugee Sponsor’s Diary of Love,” told the story of Carol Whitlock, a Wisconsinite residing in Red Wing, Minnesota, who sponsored a Black Cuban from Fort McCoy. In this story—which was based on the journal that Whitlock’s kept at the time—Whitlock describes her hesitation to sponsor a Black Cuban due to the bad press that circulated. She initially had requested a “Hispanic man” who “had made an effort to learn English,” as she felt that a lighter-skinned refugee would be safer in her community. In her diary, Whitlock wrote: “What right do we have to sit here examining fellow human beings like bugs on a pin, deciding whether they’re worthy of a chance? When we walk through the outer office, they beg us with their eyes—please like me, please take me, I hide in the inner office.”

We interviewed Ricardo González, who in 1980 was the Executive Director of the Spanish American Association, which helped sponsor 47 “Marielitos” out of Fort McCoy. He shared some details of the chaos in the sponsoring process:

We scheduled interviews first with all the families, and then the gay people in the compound, and that day we spent there, at Fort McCoy, I must have talked to about 60 people at least ... what criteria were we going to use? There weren’t that many single women but there were lots of men ... Those days if someone had been in jail for “peligrosidad” that was OK to us ... at one time I had about six people crashing in the house ... I used my place for them to have as a stop between leaving the camp and going on to live with the prospective sponsors ... I was contacting families, asking people to take

¹⁴ For a good analysis see Manoucheka.

¹⁵ See Lipman, p. 74.

¹⁶ For a detailed study see Jacklin p. 77.

¹⁷ See Lipman, p. 78.

somebody in ... sponsoring to get them out of McCoy to then find a secondary sponsor ... Many of the marielitos would just tell me “Ricardo, tú sabes, yo me voy para Miami” as soon as they got through the gate. (González)

Mariel migrants at Fort McCoy depended greatly on the personal relationships they could develop with American camp personnel to find sponsors. Many Cuban refugees went to live temporarily with soldiers, camp volunteers, or interpreters who decided to sponsor Mariel migrants. Erne, for example, met his first sponsor working at the Fort McCoy kitchen. Farmers and other small business owners in the Sparta and La Crosse areas also sponsored Cubans to work for them but, in some cases, paid them exploitative wages, which prompted the refugees to break the sponsorship and continue on their own. Cubans also often convinced their American hosts to sponsor more Cubans to get out of the base even knowing that those refugees still at Fort McCoy had no resources and planned to go directly to Miami. American sponsors had committed to help Cubans find work and education but did not have to report regularly to FEMA or US Immigration on the progress of refugees.

Although many Wisconsinites opened their homes and churches to Cubans, careful matching with sponsors was not a priority as Fort McCoy, and FEMA authorities expedited the placement. Sponsors were not made aware directly by FEMA of the necessary next steps in the immigration process or any other legal needs of the Cubans. Fort McCoy authorities relied predominantly on Cuban refugees to pass on this information to their sponsors. On departing the camp, Mariel refugees would receive their I-94 Card (today known as the Department of Homeland Security Arrival/Departure Record) as their only documentation. They were then expected to report to their INS district office within 60 days of leaving the camp to establish eligibility for permanent residency and receive Lawfully Admitted Permanent Resident (LAPR) status, and file an alien registration form every year during the following five years in order to be able to apply for citizenship.¹⁸ Hundreds of Wisconsin “Marielitos” who had left their sponsors—or simply did not know enough English to explain or understand this process—struggled to complete (or simply never initiated) their immigration applications for a status adjustment and continued to have only parolee status. Some, like Erne, did manage to secure a Permanent Resident Card. His name, however, is one of the many Cuban names lost or altered in the turmoil of Mariel. The name written on his original I-94 document (and now on his Permanent Resident Card) at Fort McCoy is *Ernesto Rodríguez Cruz*, which did not match the name on his Cuban birth certificate: *Néstor Rodríguez Ruiz*. For this reason, Erne is still unable to obtain a Cuban passport to visit Cuba.

Language and cultural barriers continued limiting the access of Cubans to social, legal, and immigration services. About 200 Cubans settled in the La Crosse and Sparta area. In 1981, this became the largest Black and mixed-raced population that these towns had seen. Eventually, many Cubans found themselves enduring harsh racism and involved in difficulties with the law. Most problems related to confrontational behavior with area residents and biker gangs, mainly at La Crosse bars. By March 1981, only six months after the closing of Fort McCoy, the La Crosse Police Department had received over 400 complaints involving Cubans, while the La Crosse County Circuit Court had processed cases for 55 Cuban refugees.¹⁹

Although most cases were misdemeanor charges for disorderly conduct, stalking, shoplifting, trespassing on posted land, or driving without a license, there also were some reported cases of sexual assault. Kathleen Mann was a local lawyer who represented over one hundred Cubans in the La Crosse area. She earned the title of “the Cuban lawyer” and eventually became ostracized by the La Crosse community for her work with the Mariel migrants. In an interview with the *La Crosse Tribune*, Mann described Cubans as subjects at a clear disadvantage in the legal system, typically due to their lack of comprehension of basic US laws and their inability to communicate in English. The lack of interpreters and bilingual social workers equally affected Cubans on probation.²⁰

¹⁸ See “El proceso de salida.” This account of the timing of Mariel migrants’ eligibility for permanent residency differs from what Alexander Stephens reports in his contribution to this issue. While several of my interviewees have evidence of having received residency as early as the summer of 1981, Stephens cites a *New York Times* report that indicates the Reagan administration did not agree to make Mariel “entrants” eligible for residency claims under the Cuban Adjustment Act until 1984. More research is needed to clarify this discrepancy.

¹⁹ See “Refugees linked to rise in area crime rate.”

²⁰ See “Overreactions seen by Cuban actions.”

Mariel migrant Raúl Urrúa Balsain attending ESL classes at WWTI in La Crosse, Wisconsin. October 1980. Freedom Flotilla Collection. Special Collections Archive at Murphy Library, University of Wisconsin La Crosse.

Wisconsin Mariel Cubans were also victims of institutional racism. In February 1982, several Cuban refugees who were studying ESL at Western Wisconsin Technical Institute (WWTI), today a 2-year technical college in La Crosse, filed a complaint for racial discrimination against the school's administration. The Cuban students wanted to attend class with refugees from other nationalities enrolled in their English as a Second Language program—most were Hmong refugees who had experienced the fallout of the Vietnam War—but the school had segregated the Cubans into the old La Crosse YMCA buildings. The Cubans also demanded that the La Crosse County Board drop a rule that only applied to Cubans, which required daily class attendance in order to be eligible for welfare assistance.²¹ The ESL program was closed a month after the protests, with the school administration arguing poor attendance and low enrollments. In 1980, approximately 90 Cubans had been enrolled at WWTI. In 1982, only 2 Cubans finished two-year technical training programs.

In May of 1981, about 200 Mariel Cubans remained in Wisconsin's capital. Those in the more urban areas of Madison also faced serious difficulties with housing, employment, and surviving on the \$226 monthly welfare assistance checks they received. They were discriminated against for speaking Spanish in public and due to the perception Americans had of the Cubans as criminals. As a result, an organization called The José Martí Cuban Community of Dane County, formed by refugees Roberto Redondo and Pedro Méndez, started advocating for the Cuban community to have interpreter services available and to educate police officers.²² High-profile crime cases in Madison, such as that of Mariel refugee Osvaldo Durruthy, had contributed to negative views of Cubans. On July 1994, Durruthy made news nationwide for attempting to murder the infamous Milwaukee serial killer and sex offender Jeffrey Dahmer, who was serving a sentence at the Columbia Correctional Institution in Portage, Wisconsin.

With the closing of Fort McCoy on November 3, 1980, 84 outstanding unaccompanied minors were moved to a summer camp facility at Wyalusing State Park, in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. The facility had been set up by the State of Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services and stayed opened until December 8, 1980. In the spring of 1981, an organization called the United Migrant Opportunity Service was contracted by the state to set up an independent living program for Cuban youths who were 17 or older. The program was optional and provided supervised apartment living, clothing, placement services, high school education, medical and dental

²¹ See "Cubans call off boycott."

²² See "Bad Public Perception Concerns City Cubans."

coverage, and some vocational training, including English as a second language. Many young Cubans actually left their foster homes to join this program, which provided them with services until their 19th birthday.²³

One of those minors who was sent to Fort McCoy directly from a juvenile facility in Havana is Armando Rodríguez Palomar, born in 1964. He came in the Mariel Boatlift alone at age 16 and spent six months between Fort McCoy and Wyalusing State Park. Armando shared the story of his Mariel journey from Havana to Fort McCoy and the traumatic ways in which his life was altered:

The first time they kicked me out of Cuba I refused and told them I didn't want to come here. But then they told me that my brother was already at Mariel ... They told me my older brother was coming to the United States with me, imagine that, I was confused, I was only 16 years old ... When I got to Fort McCoy, they told me someone by the name of Guillermo Rodríguez was there. But they were wrong. It was not my brother; it was my father because they have the same name. I didn't even know my father had come. My brother Guillermo is still in Cuba today ... Life is like that, you know? I never had anything to do with my father in Cuba. But at Fort McCoy I got used to seeing him daily from the other side of the double barb-wire fence. We kids were in isolated areas ... I never knew exactly how my father got out of the base. My mother died in Cuba, and I lost many years in jail. I never saw her again, and I had to come clean with my siblings in Cuba about that.

At Wyalusing there was this white American guy, Denis Maloney ... I asked him if he wanted to be my dad. That very same night he came to see me with an interpreter and told me that he would bring me home. Nancy, his wife, she's like my mother. After Denis died, I wanted to find her (Nancy, my mom) and pay my respect. We talked for many hours and I asked for her forgiveness for all the many things I had done wrong ... I lived with them for 2½ years ... probably the best years of my life ... I was enrolled in Madison Memorial High school where I played soccer for the team. But I felt lonely, I was the only Cuban there. The rest of the Cubans were on the black side of town, East Side. I started hanging out with them, doing things I had not done in a long time. I don't blame anyone, but that's how I left my sponsors ... I remember my dad came to see me one day with all my soccer gear. He wanted me to return ... But he didn't realize how far gone I was already. These were petty crimes, yes, stealing cars mostly. We wanted music, women, and cars. Little by little, we all ended up in jail. All the minors, we all ended up either in jail or drinking on the street ... If I could change something about my past it would be to finish high school in Madison. We weren't thinking about "making it." We all forgot about our sponsors, and we also wanted to forget Cuba. (Rodríguez)

John Satori (left) worked as a volunteer dentist and, later, as an art instructor for Mariel Cuban unaccompanied minors at Wyalusing State Park. Satori and Armando Rodríguez Palomar (right) were reunited during the recording of *Uprooted* at Satori Arts in La Crosse, Wisconsin in March 2021. Courtesy of Satori Arts and the author.

²³ See Tans, pp. 273–274.

The vast majority of Mariel migrants who settled in the US have been able to normalize their status, either through the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act or through the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. After leaving their camps, however, thousands of black and mixed-raced Cuban Mariel migrants were convicted of criminal offenses. Among them are Niño, Marcos, Osvaldo, and Armando. They have been the long-term victims of the traumatic Cold War scenarios of Mariel. They have been victims of Cuban and Cuban-American racism but even more of the systemic disparities embedded in the US immigration and criminal justice systems. The “entrant” category has remained a critical obstacle in their cases because even after they have served the disproportionate prison sentences they received during the 1980s, they must continue today their precarious journey through immigration limbo. Now in their sixties, these “Marielitos” are not eligible to apply for Permanent Resident or US Citizenship status because of felony offenses recorded during the excessive—and today mostly archaic—rules of the Reagan Administration’s “war on drugs.” This means, above all, that unless they are granted a federal pardon, they will never be able to travel outside the US to visit Cuba again.

The delayed period of military confinement endured by thousands of Black Mariel refugees at resettlement camps during the summer of 1980 was a pivotal point in the reconfiguration of the Black Cuban-American community beyond South Florida, as the majority of refugees who faced the most difficulties to resettle out of the camps were lower-class, Black or mixed-race, single young men. They were faced with the harsh realities of a new racialized identity within the US, an identity which they did not understand, and one that had been framed by the militarized environment of the camps. Moreover, while a myth of criminality had been manufactured by Cuban authorities for all those leaving via Mariel, this narrative was amplified by their detention in the US, and widely disseminated by local and national American press.

Together, the historical denial of the Blackness of Mariel—mostly by the Cuban American community—and the accompanying reluctance to include Black voices as participants in the debate about the exodus serve to muffle Black stories under the archaic blanket of the Cuban-American tale of success into the American Dream. This success tale, however, has been predicated on the selective silencing of race—a sort of unspoken pact on the homogenization of Cuban whiteness— which has obscured the ways in which the perceived Blackness of Mariel subjects lead to their criminalization.

This invisibility of Black Mariel subjects perhaps can only be disrupted by human stories that may make us uncomfortable. Public scholarship, in this regard, allows us to intervene in this silence. For instance, exhibiting photographic images of Black Mariel migrants at these camps has been critical as we have been very limited in our ability to share the collective trauma that was lived in the Mariel camps. These images speak to the Cuban transnational community not about the past but rather about the present racial fears of the Cuban diaspora. As the descendants of victims of historical ruptures, racism, and trauma, we must participate in the reactivation of these racial and cultural memories. For the Black Cuban transnational community, in particular, these images of Black refugees at Fort McCoy may act as vehicles for working through trauma.

Sharing their traumatic memories of the journey from Mariel to Fort McCoy, as well of the difficult resettlement years that followed that summer of 1980, has been a strenuous and emotionally-taxing task for these Wisconsin Mariel refugees. They are rewriting, this time in their own words, a unique and neglected segment of the history of the Mariel exodus and the state of Wisconsin. More importantly, collaborating in these public scholarship projects has empowered these Mariel refugees with their own political voice. They have gained significant awareness of the social, legal, and migratory policies that have discriminated against them for decades, and they have united as a community to advocate for more visibility and racial justice for themselves.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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