

University of Nevada, Reno

La Vida Nueva:

Detainees, Arkansans, and Libertad During the Cuban Refugee Crisis of 1980-1983

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in History

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Abstract

Fort Chaffee, Arkansas and the surrounding communities were at the center of racial discrimination throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The area also serves as a case study for the treatment of Cubans during the Mariel Boatlift in the United States between 1980 and 1982. This thesis argues that Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, and other military bases across the United States served as a transitional space during the Mariel Boatlift that separated Cuban identities from fearful communities that continually fought against the different racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual identities of the *Marielitos*. An examination of the surrounding community, government officials, and the Cuban refugees highlights the intersections of these three perspectives.

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Introduction

On Sunday, June 1st, 1980, at around 1:30pm a riot broke out at Fort Chaffee among the Cuban exiles interned there. Some military personnel attempted to calm the hundreds of *Marielitos*, but they could not detain or stop them due to the status of “Cuban-Haitian Entrant: Status Pending.”¹ At this point in the detention of Cuban exiles, their status protected them from direct interference or arrest by military personnel. Since they were still waiting for immigration status, they were considered foreign nationals. The army could only walk alongside the protestors. The crowd of 200 Cubans protested their arrival and continual stay in Arkansas and began marching towards the town of Barling, Arkansas, a community immediately outside of Fort Chaffee. Several state police cars blocked the bridge to the town’s entrance on Route 22.² The officers jumped out of the car, brandishing batons and threatening to beat the refugees. Army personnel stepped in, trying to mediate. Some seventy-five Cubans made it past the barricade, while more State police officers arrived and began beating the remaining refugees, targeting heads and limbs.³ Eduardo Gamarra, a recent graduate of the University of Arkansas and a member of the Red Cross stationed at Fort Chaffee, ran up to the crowd. Gamarra was a first-generation Bolivian immigrant himself, who understood the struggles of relocation. He pleaded with protestors not to continue onward, trying to inform the group that almost

¹ Stevens, Alexander, “*I Hope They Don’t Come to Plains: Race and Detention of Mariel Cubans (1980-1981)*.” The University of Georgia, Master of Arts Thesis. 2016. Eduardo Gamarra interview with Alexander Stevens. Pg. 51.

² Guerrero, Perla M. *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pg. 74.

³ Ibid. Pg. 74.

every person in that town was armed.⁴ The Cubans ignored the warning, and residents of the town and local police began forming defensive lines at the edge of town and covering the sides of the streets. As Gamarra predicted, the citizens were heavily armed with pistols, rifles, and even horses.⁵ Police tried to mediate between the two groups and Gamarra tried to help by translating. In the chaos of refugees shouting for freedom, and residents of Barling shoving, the local police opened fire on the crowd.⁶ In a Civil Rights Division probe of the event conducted by the Federal Bureau of Intelligence (FBI), it was found that state police shot and killed five Cuban refugees.⁷ The community forcibly shoved and pushed the crowd back toward Ft. Chaffee, sealing them into a remote gated area of the base.⁸ The next morning, Gamarra recounted, a local area news story reinterpreted the protest as a “sit-in protest on the street.”⁹ The refugees’ cries for “Libertad!” represent their frustration with a broken resettlement system. Their immigration into the United States had become imprisonment, rather than a welcomed celebration.

While Cubans protested their internment at other military bases across the United States; Fort Chaffee, Arkansas and the June 1st, 1980, incident became a reason for the Arkansas community and government officials to reignite fears of difference that

⁴ Stevens, Alexander, *“I Hope They Don’t Come to Plains: Race and Detention of Mariel Cubans (1980-1981).* The University of Georgia, Master of Arts Thesis. Gamarra, Eduardo interview with Alexander Stevens. Pg. 51.

⁵ Ibid. Pg. 51.

⁶ Wilcox, William “Cuban Situation Incident and Ticker Summary, as of 1:00 p.m., June 11th, 1980” University of Miami Cuban Heritage Collection Archive. Pg. 1

⁷ Ibid. Pg. 1.

⁸ Stevens, Alexander, *“I Hope They Don’t Come to Plains: Race and Detention of Mariel Cubans (1980-1981).* The University of Georgia, Master of Arts Thesis Pg. 50

⁹ Ibid. Pg. 50.

continue into the modern day. For politically conservative communities across the southern United States, the main driving force of these tensions is and was race. Arkansas and the neighboring state of Oklahoma were at the center of some of the worst racial violence demonstrations of the late 19th century. This violence was hidden from the public spotlight with the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1971 but still persisted in new forms. This thesis explores these historical tensions as they resurfaced in response to the abrupt arrival of a Cuban and Afro-Cuban immigrant population at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. The specific location of this thesis is intentional and serves as a unique case study of these fears and tensions of both immigration and communism in the later years of the Cold War.

While acts of violence in the southern United States were typically directed at black communities, new fears of immigration sprouted alongside existing discrimination through the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border. Fears of illegal immigrants stealing jobs from white Americans spread quickly through southern communities during the late 20th century. Historian Adam Goodman argues that there is “... a supposed Anglo, Protestant, law-abiding US citizen 'us' and a non-Anglo, non-Protestant, criminal-illegal alien 'them.’”¹⁰ Though Goodman’s research focuses on Mexican Americans, the same “us and them” mindset applies to local responses to Cuban immigrants in Fort Chaffee Arkansas and across the continental United States. In the modern era, we see illegal alien rhetoric frequently used within political circles. One of the most recently famous examples includes campaign speeches, press conferences, and Tweets from the 45th

¹⁰ Goodman, Adam. *The Deportation Machine: America’s Long History of Expelling Immigrants*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pg. 5.

president, Donald Trump. “Build the wall!” was a popular phrase of former President Trump throughout the 2016 presidential debates.¹¹ In 2018, Donald Trump said “These aren’t people. These are animals” in reference to undocumented immigrants on the Mexican border.¹² Through politicians and the American populous, these racist stereotypes continue to reinforce the dynamic of us versus them.

At the same time Cuban refugees experienced significant racism when they arrived in Arkansas, however they also found opportunities for newfound freedoms. *Transformistas* and openly homosexual Cubans were often free to express themselves at Fort Chaffee by defying gender expectations. While clothing was only issued based on biological sex, photographs from Chaffee suggest these *transformistas* were able to dress themselves in women’s clothing, accessories, and makeup. This demonstrates that although the outside community was fearful of gender non-conforming people, some Cubans created solidarity networks on base so their fellow refugees could feel comfortable with their new identities. Politicians, community members, and base officials often criticized these homosexual refugees for their mannerisms and suggested they needed to change themselves and identities to conform to U.S. societal standards. Officials also criticized and attempted to convert refugees away from religious practices of Santería and Lucumí based religious practices. However, refugees continued these practices in secret through musical worship ceremonies and portraits of *santos*.

¹¹ Nixon, Ron, and Linda Qiu. “Trump’s Evolving Words on the Wall.” The New York Times, January 18, 2018.

¹² Neuman, Scott. “During Roundtable, Trump Calls Some Unauthorized Immigrants 'Animals'.” National Public Radio, May 17, 2018.

While some of these identity transformations took place on other military bases during the Mariel Boatlift, due to the availability of print media, musical instruments, and the refugees vocal protests of their internment, Fort Chaffee is a unique case study worthy of a dedicated analysis. This thesis analyzes government, refugee, and community perspectives to identify what *La Vida Nueva* meant to each group. My analysis focuses on only two years of internment at Fort Chaffee. But through this narrow chronological and geographic scope, I present the intricacies and the innerworkings of refugee life and the immigration process from arrival to eventual sponsorship. This focused examination allows me to highlight points of tension and conflict, as well as moments of community through the Cuban Refugee Crisis. My intent is to shed light on the numerous stories and struggles of Cuban refugees whose voices are lost within larger, broader historical studies.

In this thesis, I argue that Fort Chaffee, Arkansas served as a transitional space between Cuba and the United States during the Mariel Boatlift that separated Cuban identities from fearful communities that continually fought against the various racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual identities of the *Marielitos*. While security measures were designed to keep Cuban refugees contained within large-scale military bases, official efforts were spread thin. Less oversight meant officials were only focused on immediate security concerns such as violence, break outs, and direct confrontation. This left Cuban immigrants free to create communities and individual identities that refused to conform to U.S. cultural standards, regardless of the protests and xenophobic demonstrations of some Arkansans outside of the base. Cuban exiles created new community spaces that protected identities of sexual nonconformity, religious freedom, and new artistic styles.

Fort Chaffee was unique for a number of reasons. The base hosted a refugee newspaper, *La Vida Nueva*, which was written by refugees, for refugees. Print media and journalism opportunities were an amenity that was not provided on other military bases. Other Cuban communities were often directly censored due to smaller populations, and stricter military staff. The title of the paper itself presented the reader with an interesting comparison. *La Vida Nueva* or *The New Life* comes with comparisons of freedom, opportunity, and starting over. However, fences and barbed wire contradicted their ability to fully start over, and constantly reminded refugees of punishment, and imprisonment. Often these refugees were escaping imprisonment in Cuba, due to religion, sexuality, or other anti-revolutionary action. By placing them back into detention centers, it was an experience comparable to their old lives rather *La Vida Nueva*. Fort Chaffee existed in a duality of Cuban privilege and immigration punishment. On one hand, Cubans at Chaffee received more privileges than many other immigrant groups that came before them. On the other, unlike the previous generations of Cuban immigrants from the 1960s and 1970s, these exiles were interned for up to two years, behind fences and under the supervision of armed guards. The extent of the June 1st, 1980, incident and refugee calls for “Libertad!” while directly escaping their internment at Fort Chaffee, was unique to this immigration center. No other protest, or opposition during this time was met with direct community violence, and no other Cuban demonstrations were this large.

The refugee identities studied in this thesis are recorded in archives from both Central Arkansas and the University of Miami. Photos, journals, testimonials, letters, and other ephemera demonstrate the identities of those refugees forced to intern at Fort Chaffee. This thesis is the first to utilize and examine community complaint letters from

the Cuban Refugee Crisis courtesy of the Governor Bill Clinton Archive. When analyzed in combination with *La Vida Nueva* and primary source photographs from Fort Chaffee, this thesis provides perspectives and stories of refugees that are often absent from scholarship on the Mariel Boatlift or the Cuban Refugee Crisis. The ephemera, documents, and artifacts contained within archives in Florida and Arkansas provide an almost overwhelming number of sources, worthy of their own independent analysis. The documents discussed in the chapters below only scratch the surface of information available. I chose sources that highlighted tensions, identities, and the environment in which different cultures combined and interacted. Many of these artifacts hold historical memory and nostalgia within them, whether it is margin notes, or simply a photographic snapshot of internment. It is likely that similar archives exist for the five other military bases in which Cubans and Haitians were interned throughout this two-year period. However, the main purpose of this research is to examine and understand the lives of Cuban refugees and those who lived and worked in and around Fort Chaffee. Other historical accounts have sought to look at the large-scale implications of Cuban and Haitian internment across the United States mainly from a political and social perspective. By using these secondary sources as background information, I am able to contextualize the Cuban immigration experience at Fort Chaffee within the Cold War era and the Mariel Boatlift.

Historiography and Methodology

To fully understand and analyze the perspectives of *Marielitos* in the southern United States, it is vital to examine immigration and deportation in U.S. history. Adam

Goodman's *The Deportation Machine* traces 140 years of the United States privileging, deporting, and violently expelling immigrants. "This book is an attempt to see the deportation machine as a whole, looking at the forms of explosion together with the bureaucratic, capitalist, and racist imperatives that have driven them over nearly a century and a half."¹³ Understanding frameworks and incentives for these policies contributes immensely to understanding the fears and government policy surrounding the Mariel Boatlift. Throughout the chapters of *The Deportation Machine* Goodman argues that while those in power have continually operated the "deportation machine," immigrant groups have formed networks of solidarity to fight against deportation and racist legislation. In context with other books, these overarching systems of immigration laws connect directly with Cuban refugees.

Michael Bustamante's *Cuban Memory Wars* creates a nuanced view of both Cuba and the United States during the Cold War through the perspective of Cubans living in each country. The author focuses on politics as a lens to examine the memory of Cuba and its interpretation as a 'land lost.' "Memory Wars" is a term created by Bustamante to illustrate the complex network of propaganda between the United States exile communities, and revolutionary Cuban politics. Bustamante offers a look into a spectrum of politics of Cuban identity, both within Cuba and the United States. "Unlike in other cases of civil conflict, warring Cuban sides continued to share significant national idols, symbols, and reference points."¹⁴ Whereas Bustamante focuses on divided communities

¹³ Goodman, Adam. *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pg. 6.

¹⁴ Bustamante, Michael J. *Cuban Memory Wars: Retrospective Politics in Revolution and Exile*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021. Pg. 11.

of Cubans across the Florida straits, my research focuses on the division between interned Cubans and the sponsorship networks of the southern United States.

Sociologist Susan Eckstein recently published a study analyzing politicized exile experiences from an economic and governmental perspective. Eckstein's book, *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*, creates a framework for understanding Cuban exceptionalism in the United States. Exceptionalism here refers to a complex series of economic, political, and social programs afforded specifically to Cuban immigrants between 1959 and 1978. Eckstein defines and traces this history of exceptionalism from President Dwight Eisenhower to President Donald Trump, creating a definition for the series of immigration advantages that U.S. leaders have provided in order to fight communism and gain a new conservative voter base. The depth and scale of this study are unmatched as these patterns of Cuban privilege turn into a history of U.S. policy to aid Cuban immigrants over other immigrant populations from the Americas. Eckstein's work is essential to a total understanding of the Cuban perspective at Fort Chaffee. Many exiles had been waiting to receive these privileges through immigration. Instead, they were treated as a “Cuban-Haitian Entrant: Status Pending” meaning they were not afforded the same opportunities.¹⁵

Additionally, Eckstein creates a historical framework for understanding how Americans interacted with the new flood of Cuban immigrants of earlier generations and those who came from the Mariel Boatlift. Eckstein argues, “Native-born Americans, in turn, resented the flood of new arrivals and the ‘misfits’ in their midst: especially, but not

¹⁵ Eckstein, Susan Eva. *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pg. 92.

only, in Miami.”¹⁶ The culture of resistance is a theme that is prevalent throughout Eckstein’s work. Classifying *Marielitos* as ‘misfits’ demonstrates how exceptionalism did not apply to unwanted Cubans, but rather only the earlier group of Cuban immigrants. Furthermore, this description helps illustrate the separation between new *Marielito* identities and the existing cultures that surrounded the base. Eckstein quantifies the cost of Cuban exceptionalism through both economic histories as well as cultural history to create a detailed understanding of how Cuban exceptionalism created and informed present-day politics.

For analysis of the Arkansas area, my work is in direct conversation with historian Perla Guerrero’s *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*. Guerrero traces the history of Arkansas through the perspectives of different immigrant groups inhabiting the area. This book works toward a conceptual framework of Nuevo South that scrutinizes the legacies of southern history in terms of dealing with racial difference and driving economic development; it takes into account political and social factors, considering how refugees and immigrants negotiate these dynamics in their daily lives and interactions. Through this geographically focused analysis, Guerrero is able to focus on the diversity of racialized groups in Arkansas. Her work demonstrates how community creates place, ideas, and cultures. In her chapter on Cuban exiles at Fort Chaffee, Guerrero argues that Arkansans considered the Cubans stay at Fort Chaffee as an objectionable burden. “The convoluted process to find an appropriate category for the Cubans reflected the US government’s growing apprehension about Latin American and

¹⁶ Eckstein, Susan Eva. *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pg. 118.

Caribbean people arriving in the nation despite valid claims of persecution and terror.”¹⁷ Through the community's response, and government perspectives, Guerrero is able to accurately position not only Cubans but all Latin Americans in the “Nuevo South” as being part of a rising anti-Latino/a political narrative. Often the research within this thesis builds off of these arguments, adding more specificity to Cuban refugee experiences at Fort Chaffee through a more focused approach.

Guerrero is part of a wider push within the Latino/a scholarship communities to study race, ethnicity, and culture through a more inclusive lens. Benjamin Cramer’s *Questioning the Cuban Exile Model: Race, Gender, and Resettlement 1959-1979* creates a more inclusive definition of Cuban American immigrant identity. Cramer argues that his history and those that follow should be cognizant of various communities, religions, genders, and sexual orientations. Cramer sought to restructure existing and previous sociological and historical methodologies. The author argues that previous political models “present Cubans as overtly political, highly educated, universally white, economically successful, residents of Miami, and martyrs of Castro’s revolution.”¹⁸ Through challenging this narrative Cramer argues for a less binary view of the immigrant community. My thesis follows Cramer’s lead by emphasizing individual identities, as well as a community identity unique to Fort Chaffee. Through an individual emphasis, as opposed to generalizing groups, I can more accurately incorporate other historical methodologies like historical memory and spatial identity.

¹⁷ Guerrero, Perla. *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*. Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 2017. Pgs. 109-110.

¹⁸ Cramer, Benjamin W. *Questioning the Cuban Exile Model: Race, Gender, and Resettlement, 1959-1979*. El Paso: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2010. Pg. ix.

Finally, this thesis is informed by the recent work of historian Hideaki Kami in *Diplomacy Meets Migration: US Relations with Cuba during the Cold War*. Kami is able to demonstrate how political policy directly affected Cubans, Americans, and the *Marielitos*. Kami explains that “...unlike most migration historians whose central focus remains on the nation-states’ control of human mobility and its impact on the lives of migrants, this study places more emphasis on the impact of migration and migrant activities on high-level international politics.”¹⁹ Mobility serves as the main historical methodology throughout the book. My research directly engages in the lack of mobility of Cuban refugees and how their internment on U.S. military bases caused not only community panic but large-scale government reform and political policy. When combined with *Nuevo South* these methodologies lay the framework for a local perspective to shift and challenge national and international narratives of the Mariel Boatlift.

My thesis builds on the methodologies of the authors above but uses a much smaller geographic and chronological scope for the majority of the analysis. At the forefront, my thesis analyzes newly accessible archives, such as the Governor Bill Clinton Collection, and photographs courtesy of the University of Arkansas, Little Rock. These images demonstrate Cuban personalities, violent tensions, and White Savior complexes. Geography, mobility, and place-making studies are essential to understanding exactly why Arkansans responded mainly aggressively to the arrival of Cuban immigrants. Goodman’s *Deportation Machine* is essential for understanding the United

¹⁹ Kami, Hideaki. *Diplomacy Meets Migration: US Relations with Cuba During the Cold War*. First paperback edition. New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pg. 6.

States' complex history of deportation of immigrants, and the continual fight against the systematic machine. Bustamante's historical framework for Cuban historical memory and nostalgia regarding Cuban immigrant identity helps me further contextualize personal Cuban identities at Fort Chaffee. Furthermore, through the work of Cramer and Guerrero, I am able to contextualize the individual and exceptional identities within Fort Chaffee and the surrounding communities. Kami and Eckstein created the main framework for understanding the political and economic decisions leading up to the Mariel boatlift and these internment camps.

Through engagement with all of these scholars, I hope to bring a better understanding of how these immigration networks functioned, and the discrimination that refugees faced during the Boatlift. It is evident that there is a need for a better understanding of community networks surrounding immigration facilities during the boatlift. Furthermore, there is a need to fully understand the uniqueness of identities and historical memories of refugees at Fort Chaffee and throughout the larger immigration networks of 1980 through 1983. Through this analysis, I hope to create a better understanding of United States immigration politics and our current definitions of exceptionalism.

Background

With Fidel Castro's victory in sight, many Cubans began celebrating the victory of the Cuban Revolution and the reforms it promised to bring. By 1958, the United States fully removed its support for the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship. President Dwight D. Eisenhower stopped supplying Cuba with U.S. aid and military equipment. With his

downfall looming, Batista fled Cuba in the early morning hours of January 1, 1959. Alongside Batista, the first large waves of mainly white Cuban exiles began immigrating to the U.S.²⁰ These Cubans feared the loss of their wealth and imprisonment by the new Cuban government. Before Castro seized power, the U.S. State Department issued a limited number of immigration visas per year. The process of immigration was time-consuming, involving years of government bureaucracy. However, the Eisenhower administration wanted to accept this mass influx of immigrants. An existing system of Cuban ‘tourist’ visas, valid for four years and up to one month per visit offered a unique workaround.²¹ These visas were originally used for wealthy Cubans to shop and travel within the U.S. at will. However, tourism visas were easy to grant and allowed similar freedoms to an immigration visa. Under the direction of the Eisenhower administration, 1,600 tourist visas were issued per week to Cuban exiles by the end of 1960.²² The U.S. government knew that these were not tourists, but rather longer-term immigrants. After borders began to close in 1963, the U.S. government “reimagined” and changed the visa statuses to “tourist-refugee.”²³

Reinterpretation of these travel visas became the start what many scholars refer to as ‘Cuban exceptionalism’ or ‘Cuban privilege.’ This concept was a series of economic and social programs aimed at assisting Cuban exiles through education, and food assistance for those coming to the United States shortly after the Cuban Revolution. The

²⁰ Bustamante, Michael J. *Cuban Memory Wars: Retrospective Politics in Revolution and Exile*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021. Pg. 63.

²¹ Eckstein, Susan. *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pg. 8.

²² *Ibid.* Pg. 9.

²³ *Ibid.* Pg. 9.

years 1961 to 1978 saw an increase of incentives for Cuban immigration to the United States across presidential administrations. In the early 1960s, the Cuban Refugee Program (CRP) began to offer direct economic relief and social programs to these ‘reimagined’ Cuban tourists. On June 28th, 1962 President Kennedy signed an amendment to the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act (P.L. 87-510) and formalized these implied Cuban refugee privileges. Sociologist Susan Eckstein argues that “His [President Kennedy’s] administration envisioned that the CRP would serve as immigrant bait, to lure other Cubans to America, on the presumption both that a large brain drain would cause the Castro-led government to collapse, and a mass exodus would turn world opinion against the revolution.”²⁴ These were indeed tempting programs. Cuban families could receive up to \$100²⁵ per month, in addition to health care, food assistance, basic language programs in English, vocational school, adult education, interest-free college loans, and grants.²⁶ These were not common programs, and most other immigrant communities from the Americas did not receive any of the same benefits.

Cuban refugees continued to benefit from government assistance programs throughout the 1970s. By 1973, the Nixon administration had increased CRP funding to \$145,000,000.²⁷ From President Johnson to President Nixon, the United States partnered with the Cuban government to offer ‘Freedom Flights’ to the United States. This program offered an additional way for immigrants to travel to the United States and take advantage of U.S. economic incentives. President Nixon felt that the increased funding

²⁴ Eckstein, Susan. *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pgs. 45-46.

²⁵ \$986,063,000 in 2023.

²⁶ Ibid. Pgs. 45-46.

²⁷ Ibid. Pg. 47.

and aid would not only further subvert Cuba in the Cold War but would also serve to turn Cuban exiles into a Republican voting bloc.²⁸ American presidencies of the Cold War treated Cuban refugees as tools rather than autonomous people. Many Cuban refugees began to campaign and vote for Republican and conservative politicians.

Conservative political figures appealed to Cuban exiles' anti-communist sentiments and promised to increase funding to Cuban assistance programs.²⁹ Exile communities in Miami-Dade County, Florida, flourished, creating entire Cuban neighborhoods. Today, Cuban neighborhoods continue to thrive in Miami, with shops, restaurants, and live music along Calle de Ocho. Monuments to previous presidential administrations line the streets, and shops carry Cuban flags along with political cartoons mocking Fidel Castro and 'socialist Cuba.' For these exiles, the old Cuba was lost so a reimagined Cuba was created. Michael Bustamante in his book *Cuban Memory Wars* argues, "The city [Miami] became 'mnemonic real estate' too. A place where everything from business names to record collections would honor an idealized island to which most exiles hoped to return."³⁰ Many of these self-proclaimed exiles viewed these early years as an extended vacation, making the city into a temporary version of a Cuba that never existed through their nostalgic reinterpretations.

Cuban exiles were united under the banner of anti-communism while still encased in individual nostalgic memories of Cuba. Media outlets across the Miami-Dade County area published images of *Cuba Libre* such as traditional dances, Cuban and U.S. flags

²⁸ Eckstein, Susan. *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pgs. 62-63.

²⁹ Ibid. Pgs. 62-63.

³⁰ Bustamante, Michael J. *Cuban Memory Wars: Retrospective Politics in Revolution and Exile*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021. Pg. 63.

interwoven and historic images of Havana from pre-1959. Groups gathered funding for Cuban cultural events throughout Miami paying homage to ‘Cuba of yesteryear.’³¹ In the mid-1970s, conservative Cuban organizations hosted events throughout Miami, often filling the streets of Little Havana with supporters both Cuban and not. Typically, these events included performances from Cuban artists in exile. Guitars, percussion, and singing filled halls and stages across Miami. Some of these celebrations included more radically conservative groups. Alpha 66 received continual support from parts of the community throughout the 1960s. The organization often used the imagery of a Cuba lost to support its goal of recapturing the nostalgic Cuba of yesteryear. Figure 1 shows one such image of a guitarist playing while several supporters and Alpha 66 officials sing along.³² The organization also put out 7”, 45RPM records³³ on “Alpha 66 Records,” a promotional item that was given to donors at meetings and events. These recordings had one song per side, often using a mixture of Cuban folk songs, and popular American marches to mock Fidel Castro and express a nostalgic version of Cuba.

³¹ Bustamante, Michael J. *Cuban Memory Wars: Retrospective Politics in Revolution and Exile*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021. Pg. 92

³² University of Miami. Library. Cuban Heritage Collection *Alpha 66 records, n.d., 1958-2003.*, 1958. CHC 0517 IDs 5814,5848,5849, and 5851.

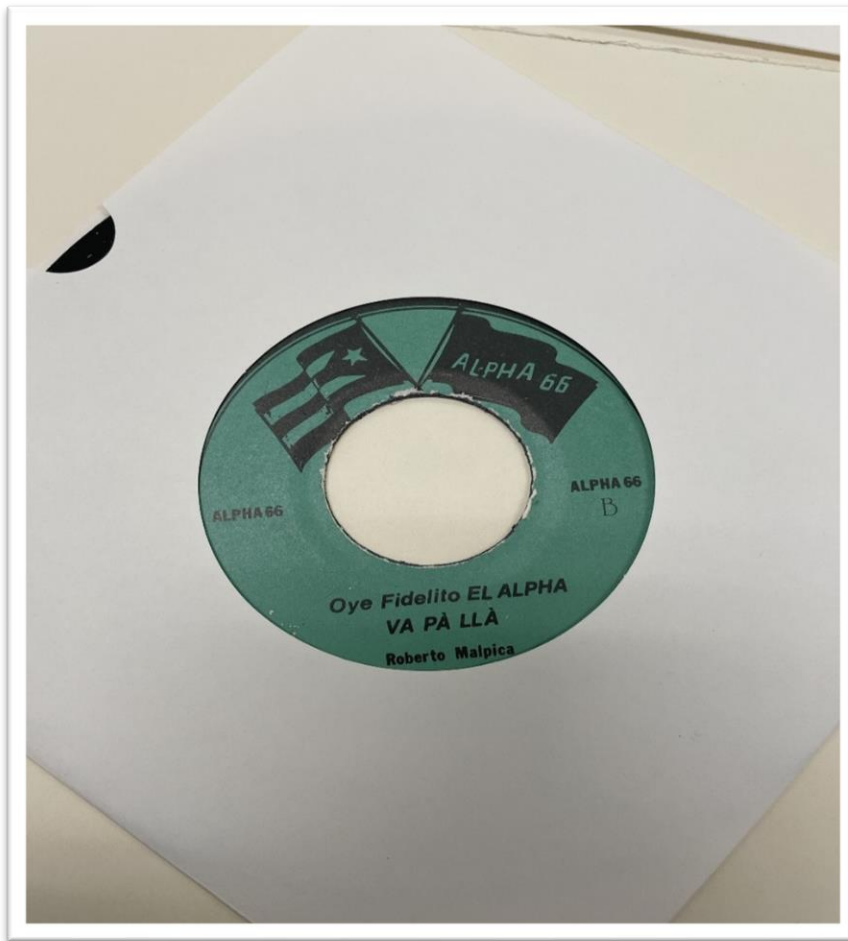


Figure 1 “Oye Fidelito” from the Alpha 66 Collection within the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami. Picture of a 45 RPM 7” promotional record distributed by Alpha 66 for members, demonstrators, or other supporters of the group. The “Alpha 66” record label suggests that these were produced and ordered in large numbers.

Mariel on the Horizon

While Cuban exiles from the first generation benefited from U.S. immigration incentives, and their original wealth from Cuba, refugees of the Mariel Boatlift had a different history. By the mid-1970s, over 665,000 Cubans had been admitted into the United States since the Cuban Revolution.³⁴ In 1973, Fidel Castro put an end to the

³⁴ García, Maria Cristina. *Havana U.S.A: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. Pg. 45.

Freedom Flights program, terminating the official immigration relationship between the two countries. 35,000 would-be émigrés were now stranded in Cuba without a direct route to the United States.³⁵ By this time, the Cuban Revolution had taken on a more politically radical stance. By the late 1960s, Cuba began to eliminate religious-based schooling and discouraged the open practicing of religion. Historians of Caribbean religions argue that during the revolutionary period, “Those who openly practiced their religion were not admitted to the Communist Party or allowed to train for or practice certain professions.”³⁶ These bans mainly affected organized religions, however certain ritualistic performances became rebranded as folk performances. Lucumí based worship, such as Santería, is a subset of the African Yoruba belief system intermixed with some Roman-Catholic beliefs. These religious belief systems trace their history to the oppression of African slaves in Cuba during Spanish rule.³⁷ Drum circles and musical performances were—and continue to be—at the center of these worship ceremonies. By the 1960s, Santería performances were praised by the revolutionary government as ‘folk’ music, even playing at large festivals and stages. *Batá*, *conga*, and *clave* were all used as a rhythmic form of worship.³⁸ However, by the early 1970s, this music had been stripped from Cuban academic literature and popular culture through the revolution's emphasis on

³⁵ Eckstein, Susan. *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pg. 76.

³⁶ Paravisini-Gebert, Lizabeth, Joseph M. Murphy, and Margarite Fernandez Olmos. *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2011. Pg. 83.

³⁷ Schweitzer, Kenneth George. *The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming: Aesthetics, Transmission, Bonding, and Creativity*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. Pg. 21-22.

³⁸ Vaughan, Umi., and Carlos. Aldama. *Carlos Aldama's Life in Batá Cuba, Diaspora, and the Drum*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. Pgs. 65-67.

racelessness.³⁹ Though these performances were now considered ‘folk’ music, they still held religious meaning.

Cubans faced not only racism, but sexualization as well. With new and changing alignments within the Revolution, Cuba became further entwined with the Soviet system and government structure by the 1970s. With these policies came a further push toward Marxist-Leninism, excluding those of homosexual orientation.⁴⁰ Castro referred to queer Cubans as *Lumpen* short for Lumpenproletariat, a negative term referring to these Cubans as “scum of the depraved elements of all classes.”⁴¹ Ian Lumsden argues that Castro “institutionally promoted homophobia” throughout the revolution, falling into trends of masculinity within revolutionary messaging.⁴² Gay and lesbian Cuban authors, poets, and artists attempted to protest discrimination through illegal or covert publishing of their pro-LGBTQ works throughout the 1970s.⁴³ One such author, Reinaldo Arenas, wrote several books throughout the era, both expressing his own experience as a gay Cuban as well as gay romance novels. In his 1993 book, *Before Night Falls*, Arenas described his life in direct conversation with Fidel Castro, contrasting his queer identity with the identity of the revolution.⁴⁴ Since 1970:

“The system of *parametrage* [parameterization] was imposed; that is, every gay writer, every gay artist, every gay dramatist, received a telegram telling him that his behavior did not fall within political and moral parameters necessary for his

³⁹ Vaughan, Umi., and Carlos. Aldama. *Carlos Aldama’s Life in Batá Cuba, Diaspora, and the Drum*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. Pgs. 65-67.

⁴⁰ Capo, 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) Pg. 84.

⁴¹ Ibid. Pg. 84.

⁴² Lumsden, Ian. *Machos Maricones & Gays*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1996. Pg. 78.

⁴³ Capo, 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) Pg. 87.

⁴⁴ Arenas, Reinaldo. *Before Night Falls*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.

job and that he was therefore terminated or offered another job in the forced labor camps.⁴⁵

Arenas was fined, and imprisoned for his work and continual publishing of gay romance novels after *parametraje* was implemented. Many Cubans feared a similar fate and attempted to immigrate to the United States.

Cubans wanted to leave and immigrate to the U.S. for numerous other reasons, besides homophobic persecution. By the latter half of the 1960s, the Cuban government had aligned itself with revolutionary causes across third-world countries, mainly in Latin America and Africa. Cuban military officials were sent to supply, train, and provide resources to revolutionaries across these countries, ultimately attempting to facilitate more revolutions.⁴⁶ In late 1975, Angola was in the midst of a civil war. Cuba assisted the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola through direct military involvement. The Revolution sent 22,000 troops in total to Angola to assist with the conflict. Many young Cubans were against military participation and feared a mandatory draft as the fighting became more intense.⁴⁷ These tensions mimicked the large draft in the United States for the Vietnam War, a war that many younger citizens believed was a needless conflict. Other Cubans were generally against the Revolutionary system but did not have the ability to leave Cuba until the later 1970s. Even more continued to believe that America was a land of opportunity and wanted personal gain as opposed to collective gains.

⁴⁵ Arenas, Reinaldo. *Before Night Falls*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000:138.

⁴⁶ Kami, Hideaki. *Diplomacy Meets Migration: U.S. Relations with Cuba During the Cold War*. New York, NY, U.S.A: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pg. 96.

⁴⁷ Eckstein, Susan. *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pg. 78.

With the conclusion of the Freedom Flights, Cubans began hijacking planes and boats and building rafts to reach the United States. In January 1980, the CIA advised President Carter that a large boatlift would be coming in the near future based on rising tensions and illegal immigration to the United States.⁴⁸ President Carter continued to accept these immigrants while attempting to work with Fidel Castro on a more streamlined immigration process. Castro wanted hijackers to be extradited back to Cuba, and the now 20-year-long U.S. naval quarantine around Cuba to be ended.⁴⁹ In return, President Carter wanted the removal of Cuban troops from Angola and the release of several political prisoners from Cuban prisons.⁵⁰ Immigration visa requests continued to build at the U.S. Interest Section in Cuba. Some people had been waiting over two years for a response.⁵¹ Finally, the tensions broke with 700 Cubans protesting outside the embassy and another 400 storming the U.S. embassy throughout mid to late March 1980. On April 1st, 1980, a group of Cubans frustrated with the immigration system crashed a hijacked bus through the gates of the Peruvian embassy while Cuban guards fired their weapons at the vehicle.⁵² A Cuban guard was killed, and others were injured in the shootout. Fidel Castro was frustrated with the situation, and three days later demanded the walls of the embassy be torn down to allow all asylum seekers to occupy the embassy.⁵³ Over the next two days, approximately 10,000 Cubans packed into the

⁴⁸ Engstrom, David Wells. *Presidential Decision Making Adrift: The Carter Administration and the Mariel Boatlift*. Lanham, Md.; Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997. Pg. 44.

⁴⁹ Ibid. Pg. 44.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Pg. 78.

⁵¹ Ibid. Pg. 80.

⁵² Ibid. Pg. 80.

⁵³ Ibid. Pg. 80.

Peruvian embassy shoulder to shoulder, quite literally occupying every inch of the property.

This large occupation came as a massive surprise to the Castro administration, which now faced the logistical problem of how to care for these asylum seekers. By the second day of the Peruvian embassy occupation, it was clear that there was not nearly enough food or water to keep the would-be immigrants cared for. Officials assured these Cubans that their requests would be processed, and their immigration visas approved if they returned back to their homes. Though the government kept its promise, that did not stop thousands of Cubans from marching in the streets shouting “Go away, delinquents! Go away, scum!”⁵⁴ Some asylum seekers reported being terrorized out of their homes, with rocks thrown at them and through windows.⁵⁵ Communist political parties gathered to aggressively chastise those who chose immigration.⁵⁶ Cubans in the growing Miami area began organizing. They gathered food and water and arranged shelter for these 10,000 potential immigrants.⁵⁷ Other more militant Cuban Americans began crying for war and demanding the ‘liberation’ of Cuba.⁵⁸ However, the Carter administration still had not decided on whether or not to officially accept this new wave of exiles.

Throughout the coming weeks, President Carter worked with the Cuban, Peruvian, and Costa Rican governments to find a potential solution to the immigration

⁵⁴ Kami, Hideaki. *Diplomacy Meets Migration: U.S. Relations with Cuba During the Cold War*. New York, NY, U.S.A: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pg. 140.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Pg. 140.

⁵⁶ Eckstein, Susan. *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pg. 80.

⁵⁷ Kami, Hideaki. *Diplomacy Meets Migration: U.S. Relations with Cuba During the Cold War*. York, NY, U.S.A: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pg. 140.

⁵⁸ Ibid. Pg. 140.

crisis. Shortly before the Peruvian embassy incident, President Carter authorized 16,000 new Cuban refugees to be allowed into the U.S. under the new 1980 Refugee Act.⁵⁹ However, the U.S. government did not want the immediate responsibility of 10,000 Cuban immigrants. President Carter suggested that 3,500, or 1/3rd of these potential immigrants be flown to Costa Rica temporarily, then flown again to the United States for screening, and resettlement, and the other 6,500 to be taken in by Peru. Only 500 of these asylum seekers entered Peru and by July of that year, the group organized a hunger strike, demanding to be admitted into the United States. After only 2 days of Costa Rican flights, and around 700 Cubans being flown, Castro demanded the end of these flights. The Costa Rican government created negative publicity and a hostile environment for the arriving Cubans.⁶⁰ Fidel Castro insisted that if asylum seekers were to be flown from Cuba, they needed to arrive immediately at their final destination, or they would not be allowed to leave at all.⁶¹ The large community of Cuban exiles in southern Florida, plus freedom of expression, made the United States one of the only possible locations where refugees would be happy and accepted.

President Carter needed to admit this group to keep up with the U.S. appearance on the world stage. As such, these Cubans were admitted to the United States under the 'refugee status' which circumvented slower immigration process speeds. By declaring this group 'refugees' it disintitiled these exiles from any of the previous Cuban American benefits. On April 20th, 1980, Castro announced that the port of Mariel was open to all

⁵⁹ Eckstein, Susan. *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pg. 81.

⁶⁰ Ibid. Pg. 82.

⁶¹ Ibid. Pg. 82.

Cubans who wanted to leave.⁶² By September of 1980, 124,784 Cuban ‘refugees’ had come across the Florida straits into the United States.⁶³

To complicate matters, Haitian immigrants began to come over with the flotilla from Miami, in hopes of also gaining U.S. citizenship. The late 1950s through the mid-1980s saw the rise and consolidation of power for François Duvalier and Jean-Claude Duvalier. Through a cult of personality surrounding Haitian mythology, François Duvalier became an autocratic, far-right dictator of Haiti who consolidated power and wealth within his dynasty. Officially, no one voted against him when he ran for office in 1957. However, over the coming years until his death thirteen years later, over 60,000 Haitians would be killed for ‘political dissidence’⁶⁴ François Duvalier died on April 21st, 1971, and his 19-year-old son, Jean-Claude Duvalier continued his regime. Like his father, Jean-Claude Duvalier misappropriated the country's wealth and humanitarian aid from other nations. In 1978, an African Swine Fever Virus ripped through Haiti causing the eradication of the entire pig population by 1982. Widespread hunger ensued as many people could not afford to eat, and the cost of food continued to increase. However, Jean-Claude Duvalier was seemingly unaffected by this. In 1980, the dictator held a notably lavish wedding to Michèle Bennett, which cost \$2,000,000.⁶⁵ Throughout the 1970s, U.S. presidential administrations would continue supporting this oppressive dictator, sending

⁶² ⁶² Eckstein, Susan. *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pg. 82.

⁶³ Kami, Hideaki. *Diplomacy Meets Migration: U.S. Relations with Cuba During the Cold War*. New York, NY, U.S.A: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pg. 145.

⁶⁴ Eckstein, Susan. *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pg. 104.

⁶⁵ \$14,314,354.07 in 2023.

funds and aid packages. Duvalier used his enormous wealth to keep the country poor and political dissidence silenced.

With conditions worsening in Haiti, many used the Mariel boatlift as an opportunity and fashioned makeshift rafts and boats to join the Cuban flotilla. While boats and rafts had come over since around 1972, immigration increased as hunger ensued within Haiti. Historian Jana Lipman argues that “Although many undocumented Haitians slipped into Haitian American communities in Florida and New York, approximately 50,000 actively sought asylum between 1972 and 1980.”⁶⁶ The Nixon and Ford administrations denied that these refugees were being persecuted by the Duvalier dynasty and as such, refused them refugee status. Throughout these years, many were put in detention centers and deported back to Haiti where they were tried and killed for their dissidence.⁶⁷ Many Haitians were not granted an option to state their claims to a jury in the United States and were automatically processed for deportation. In 1978, the Carter administration was the first to recognize these struggles, stating “Haiti is an egregious human rights offender.”⁶⁸ However continual deportations of Haitian refugees contradicted this statement. Soon after Carter spoke on Haiti, a coalition of political and moral supporters of the Haitian refugees both locally and nationally pushed forward *Haitian Refugee Center v. Civiletti*. Federal Judge Lawrence King ruled that the INS had violated the rights of the Haitian refugees through the automatic deportations. The State Department argued that they were simply “economic migrants” stating that reversing the

⁶⁶ Lipman, Jana K. “The Fish Trusts the Water, and It Is in the Water That It Is Cooked: The Caribbean Origins of the Krome Detention Center.” *Radical History Review* 2013, no. 115 (2013). Pg. 121.

⁶⁷ Engstrom, David Wells. *Presidential Decision Making Adrift: The Carter Administration and the Mariel Boatlift*. Lanham, Md.; Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997. Pg. 144.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* Pg. 144.

deportation policies would only encourage more migration.⁶⁹ This immigration debate was at its peak during the Mariel Boatlift, putting Cuban immigration privileges on display and exposing the true motives of accepting Cuban refugees. By April 23rd, 1980, the Carter administration put a halt on Haitian deportations, while still allowing them to ‘voluntarily return.’ These policies were unequal with portrayals of the Haitians as ‘illegal immigrants’ while praising Cubans as ‘heroic’ for their immigration.

Many politicians in Washington were outraged by the halting of deportation and the influx of thousands of Cubans from Mariel. Eugene Eidenberg, the Secretary to the Cabinet and Assistant to the President for Intergovernmental Affairs, stated, “At the time, [1980] we were explicitly sensitive to the likelihood that we were going to see a lot more migration for economic, political, and other reasons.”⁷⁰ These politicians were worried about illegal immigration, similar to the fears that sparked legislation and increased funding of the INS in the 1950s.⁷¹ Though proof had been filtering in through the earlier *Haitian Refugee Center v. Civiletti* lawsuit of the obvious human rights issues, politicians continued to argue that the majority were economic migrants. A National Security Council meeting claimed that changing the Haitian status from ‘economic migrant’ to ‘political refugee’ would open “the floodgates to millions of Mexicans and other undocumented present and future job seekers.”⁷² Through that stance, it is clear that the

⁶⁹ Engstrom, David Wells. *Presidential Decision Making Adrift: The Carter Administration and the Mariel Boatlift*. Lanham, Md.; Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997. Pg. 145.

⁷⁰ Ibid. Pg. 147.

⁷¹ Kang, S. Deborah. *The INS on the Line: Making Immigration Law on the US-Mexico Border, 1917-1954*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pgs. 157-163.

⁷² Brzezinski, Zbigniew. “Memorandum on the Arriving Cubans (and Haitians), undated, Carter Library, National Security Defense, ND-42, ND 16/CO 38. Contained in, Engstrom, David Wells. *Presidential Decision Making Adrift: The Carter Administration and the Mariel Boatlift*. Lanham, Md.; Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997. Pg. 148.

Haitian refugees were deemed ‘undesirable’ ‘job seekers’ whereas the Cuban refugees were seen as survivors of a tragedy. Due to the continual U.S. economic support of the Duvalier regime, it would cause further tension in the Americas if Haitians were declared refugees. The United States would have to recognize the regime’s violation of human rights. Though a large number of Haitian refugees had been and continued to come into the United States, news media in the general public focused mainly on the Mariel Cubans. Historic concerns with the communist Cuba led the media to focus on the politics of the boatlift, focusing less on humanitarian concerns and physical conditions of the refugee’s resettlement.

As Washington continued to debate questions of status and processing, Florida could not physically contain the influx of people. By May 2nd, 1980, the city of Miami opened the Orange Bowl to new refugees.⁷³ The next day, the military opened the Elgin Air Force Base to incoming refugees. Ultimately, the Carter administration settled on lumping Haitians and Cubans together as a congruent group titling them: “Cuban-Haitian Entrant (Status Pending)” offering a middle ground where neither group would be declared a refugee.⁷⁴ After two years of existing with this status, individuals could apply for “permanent resident alien” status.⁷⁵ Under this label, these *Marielitos* were not entitled to legal rights under U.S. law. Cubans of the Mariel boatlift and Haitian refugees were considered to have the same status for the first time since the Cuban Revolution. This entrant status satisfied the legal needs for INS to begin processing exiles by June of

⁷³ Lipman, Jana K. “The Fish Trusts the Water, and It Is in the Water That It Is Cooked: The Caribbean Origins of the Krome Detention Center.” *Radical History Review* 2013, no. 115 (2013): 115–41. Pg. 121.

⁷⁴ Engstrom, David Wells. *Presidential Decision Making Adrift: The Carter Administration and the Mariel Boatlift*. Lanham, Md.; Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997. Pg. 161.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* Pg. 161.

1980, to meet the influx of people in southern Florida. However, with ever increasing numbers of Cuban exiles, Washington knew they were running out of locations to house these ‘entrants.’ Under the advice of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), detention centers were expanded beyond Florida. Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania; Fort McCoy, Wisconsin; Camp Santiago, Puerto Rico; and Fort Chaffee, Arkansas were all converted into refugee camps.

Fort Chaffee

Camp Chaffee, Arkansas⁷⁶ was constructed during 1941 as training grounds for World War II. The U.S. government purchased 15,163 acres of land on the outskirts of the town of Fort Smith, Arkansas.⁷⁷ This procedure displaced around 716 property holders and cost the United States around \$1,350,000.⁷⁸ The entire camp was meant to be temporary, with structures of small, prefabricated frames.⁷⁹ Each structure looked identical, 30 feet by 90 feet, and housed around 92 people.⁸⁰ These newly constructed barracks at Camp Chaffee, Arkansas were home not only to American soldiers, but German and Italian prisoners of war (POW) from 1942 to 1945. These prisoners had to do almost no work and were continually well-fed without community protest.⁸¹ Swiss inspectors of the camp noted that Camp Chaffee was “one of the best” prison camps, noting spacious environments and the general happiness of the prisoners. In 1943, with a

⁷⁶ Later becoming Fort Chaffee after the space became permanent.

⁷⁷ Guerrero, Perla M. *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*. Austin, [Texas: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pg. 53.

⁷⁸ \$23,345,635.84 in 2023

⁷⁹ See Fig. 4 for an official map of Ft. Chaffee

⁸⁰ Guerrero, Perla M. *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pg. 53.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* Pg. 56.

heavy demand for food supply due to the war effort, European POWs were enlisted in helping Arkansas farmers, working off base, and getting paid through these farms. Additionally, the German and Italian POWs were allowed to take college courses in Arkansas. Upon their departure to Europe, these foreign combatants were praised as ‘heroes’ by the local communities for saving their crops and increasing overall agricultural yield.

Meanwhile, Executive Order 9066 was implemented, and Camp Chaffee was originally selected as an internment center for Japanese Americans. However, Governor Homer Adkins of Arkansas, an openly racist Ku Klux Klan member, did not want Japanese Americans to intern at Chaffee, or Arkansas. When the War Relocation Authority (WRA) informed Governor Adkins that the internment camp was not optional he stated, “The only way I can visualize where we can use them at all would be to fence them in concentration camps under wire fence and the guard of white soldiers.”⁸² When the internees finally arrived, they were forced to finish building their own, separate camp; the Rohwer Japanese American Relocation Center. Under the watch of armed guards, these internees were forced to dig wells, build structures, and chop wood for the entirety of the camp.⁸³

Though poor conditions were maintained by Governor Adkins, many people within Arkansas believed that army guards were “coddling” Japanese Americans. Complaints poured into the camp demanding that the internees be fed less to prevent a feared food shortage. Shortly after, Camp Chaffee reassured the public that they were not

⁸² Guerrero, Perla M. *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pg. 53.

⁸³ *Ibid.* Pg. 54.

taking community resources to feed the internees.⁸⁴ Citizens feared ‘cultural indoctrination’ of their children by Japanese Americans living in Arkansas after internment. State legislator Frank Williams created legislation to disallow Japanese Americans from attending Arkansas universities, and their children from attending Arkansas schools. Additionally, this legislation banned all Japanese residency in the state.⁸⁵ The German and Italian POWs were allowed to take college courses in Arkansas, often leaving Camp Chaffee to do so. In comparison, Japanese Americans were under the threat of being shot if anyone left the Rohwer Center. Upon their departure to Europe, these foreign combatants were praised as ‘heroes’ by the local communities for saving their crops and increasing overall agricultural yield. Through this comparison at the beginning of Camp Chaffee’s history, it is clear that Arkansans hated Japanese Americans not because of their supposed allegiance to an enemy nation, but for their culture and skin color.

Racism in Arkansas has deep roots in reconstruction tensions and the rise of Jim Crow laws across the southern United States. Following the Harrison Riots of 1905, white mobs across Arkansas sought to ethnically ‘cleanse’ the area of black and immigrant populations. White mobs burned Black neighborhoods to the ground. These racist mobs then gathered the Black people of Harrison County stripped them naked, whipped them, and ordered them all to leave the state.⁸⁶ Throughout the following years,

⁸⁴ Guerrero, Perla M. *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pg. 54.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* Pg. 56.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* Pg. 28.

the Black population fell to almost zero across all Arkansas counties.⁸⁷ Harrison County was at the epicenter of extreme white supremacist hate: other neighboring states and counties held similar values. In 1921, “Black Wall Street” a particularly wealthy portion of Tulsa, Oklahoma, was burned to the ground after a Black businessman was accused of “touching” a white woman.⁸⁸ White rioters killed an estimated 300 Black men, women, and children, effectively cleansing the area and much of Oklahoma of further Black settlement. This societal hate of Black people continued as Sundown towns⁸⁹ became increasingly popular across Arkansas and the southern United States. One of the most graphic examples is the town of Rogers, Arkansas. On the edge of town, a sign remained until the mid-1970s that read, “Nigger, You Better Not Let the Sun Set on You in Rogers.”⁹⁰ The Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist organizations thrived in Arkansas and across the South, as state legislation and local officials continued to protect these racist groups from prosecution.

Five years before the Mariel Boatlift, another group of refugees had come to Fort Chaffee seeking asylum from the newly victorious Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Like Mariel refugees, these immigrants also denounced communism, feared discrimination for their religious practices, and wanted opportunities in the United States. Though Cuban and Vietnamese cultures are vastly different, their situation in Arkansas was similar. On

⁸⁷ Lancaster, Guy. *Racial Cleansing in Arkansas, 1883-1924: Politics, Land, Labor, and Criminality*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014.

⁸⁸ Guerrero, Perla M. *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pg. 28.

⁸⁹ Sundown towns were a popular trope across the South following reconstruction, some continue to exist ‘unofficially’ today. When the sun went down, if a black person was seen, they were typically harassed, murdered, or lynched by white citizens until the sun rose again. Some towns continue to play the sirens marking the ‘start’ of sundown today, citing their ‘historic roots’.

⁹⁰ Guerrero, Perla M. *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pg. 29.

April 30th, 1975, Vietnamese refugees were flown to the United States as part of the immediate evacuation of the U.S. military from Vietnam. Throughout April and the following months over 120,000 Vietnamese refugees were processed through Fort Chaffee and held until immigration decisions were able to process. David Pryor, the governor of Arkansas, gave a speech in Little Rock thanking the community for its support and welcoming the Vietnamese refugees; many clapped and rejoiced, marking this as a win against Communism.

However, others continued the racist traditions of the past. One sign read “RESCUE U.S.A from REDS FIRST” and another “WHITE MEN UNITE AND FIGHT.”⁹¹ While this is an example of blatant racism, discrimination comes in all forms and is not limited to direct action. After Vietnamese refugees had been settled temporarily at Fort Chaffee, similar fears sparked within Arkansas communities mimicking the ‘Yellow Peril’ of interned Japanese Americans during World War II. Arkansans wrote to the governor, demanding that emergency funds not be allocated to the Vietnamese people. Some worried that the refugees would have high birth rates and take over Arkansas. Others worried about their white culture being erased. However, in contradiction to Governor Adkins, Governor Pryor continued allocating funds.⁹² While not speaking publicly on the matter, Pryor was quietly working on solutions to get the refugees to leave Arkansas as soon as possible. He silently agreed with his constituents and quickly organized plans to arrange for corporate sponsors out of state. Vietnamese internment at Fort Chaffee foreshadowed the experiences of Mariel refugees.

⁹¹ Guerrero, Perla M. *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*. Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 2017. Pg. 49.

⁹² *Ibid.* Pg 70.

For days before the first flight of Cuban refugees to Fort Chaffee, *The Arkansas Gazette* and major national news outlets such as *The New York Times* had reported on the United States' immigration 'problems.' Similar to historic tensions, the people of Arkansas and surrounding communities began to fear Cubans at Fort Chaffee. On May 9th, 1980, a retired Marine, Kevin "Mac" McCarthy, gained access to Fort Chaffee via an expired military identification card. Corresponding with the first flight of 128 refugees from Florida, McCarthy quickly changed out of his uniform and into the pure white robes of the KKK, flagging down the arriving cargo plane.⁹³ "Don't let them in!" he screamed, "Hoodlums! They're gonna come here and get welfare, gonna get a free ride for everything."⁹⁴ Tensions of the past continued to show themselves as more refugees begin to arrive at Ft. Chaffee. By May 9th, 1980, 19,060 entrants had arrived at the fort.⁹⁵

Throughout the almost two-year Fort Chaffee was open, the demographic numbers changed significantly. By its closure at the end of 1981, over 20,000 Cuban refugees had gone through Fort Chaffee, around 15% of the total boatlift population.⁹⁶ 15,983 refugees were given sponsorship opportunities and granted citizenship sometime within the two years of Fort Chaffee refugee center operation.⁹⁷ 41.3% of the population at Chaffee was 20-30 years old, and 25.8% were 31-40 years old.⁹⁸ Around 14% of the population at Chaffee was female, meaning about 86% were male. Out of the entire

⁹³ Stevens, William K. Special to The New York Times. "Arkansas Fort Receives First of Thousands of Cubans: 'The Star-Spangled Banner' Warning from Retired Marine." New York Times (1980-). 1980. Pg. 11.

⁹⁴ Ibid., Pg. 11.

⁹⁵ Cuban Haitian Task Force, "Overview" Unknown Date, Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1, Pg. 15.

⁹⁶ Ibid. Pg. 16.

⁹⁷ Ibid. Pg. 16.

⁹⁸ Ibid. Pg. 17.

refugee population over 20% were Black or Mulatto, which was about 5% more than any of the previous generations of Cuban exiles.⁹⁹ However, Fort Chaffee's colored population was almost double the Boatlift average. Estimates suggest up to 40% of the Cubans at Chaffee were nonwhite.¹⁰⁰ This meant that non-white Cubans almost outnumbered the surrounding populations of Fort Smith and Barling. In fact, due to the sudden population increase at Fort Chaffee, the base was considered the 11th largest city in Arkansas at its height.¹⁰¹ By January 31st, 1981, nine months after the start of the boatlift, the population demographics changed across all resettlement centers. Out of a total unsettled population of 5,022 entrants across all federal facilities, 97.6% of the refugees left were male, and 75% were "Black or Mulatto."¹⁰² These demographics highlight xenophobic tensions that remain buried within Arkansas and government sponsorship systems.

Through these experiences, three main perspectives present themselves: the residents of Fort Smith, Arkansas, the U.S. government officials, and the Cuban refugees. By using a protest that Cuban refugees staged on June 1st, 1980, as an anchor point for each of the following sections, the lasting consequences of Cuban immigration become clear. The following three sections explore official perspectives, refugee perspectives, and community perspectives. Furthermore, each section is an important piece to understanding wider themes of United States immigration policy and conservative fears that remain buried within the southern United States. This thesis will explore each

⁹⁹ Guerrero, Perla M. *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pg. 80.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Pg. 83.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Pg. 83.

¹⁰² Ibid. Pg. 90.

perspective in order to highlight the complex cultural, political, and spiritual tensions at Fort Chaffee during the Mariel Boatlift period.

Chapter 1: Official Perspectives

Most people in positions of government authority saw the riots of June 1, 1980, more as a warning for further protests, while simultaneously downplaying the significance of Cuban protests to the public. *The Washington Post* said that FEMA spokesperson Bill McAda described Cuban protests at other military locations across the country as “panty raids.”¹⁰³ This belittling of Cuban concerns shows not only a dismissal of the immigration crisis, but also FEMA and McAda attempting to downplay the severity of the protests as much as possible. However, it was hard to brush off the immense scale of the Fort Chaffee protest. For many Americans, news of this protest confirmed their suspicions of violent and temperamental refugees. However, the public was not told the entire story, with many news outlets reporting the incident as a sit-in protest. In actuality, hundreds of Arkansans had to be dispersed with tear gas to prevent further unrest. Several buildings were burned in protest, and officers used live shotgun rounds, rubber bullets, and tear gas to disperse both Arkansans with their own firearms and the refugees protesting. The governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton, feared that the locals would create a “bloodbath” that rivaled race riots of the 20th century.¹⁰⁴ President Carter’s instructions to local officials were clear: resettle refugees as quickly as possible to avoid conflict. However, while community news outlets published a friendly portrayal

¹⁰³ Unknown Author, “Refugees Who Fled Base Reported Back in Camp” May 27th, 1980. *The Washington Post*, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰⁴ Clinton, Bill, *My Life*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004. Pg. 276.

of refugees, in private, government officials continually feared the worst of the *Marielitos*.

Historian Hideaki Kami describes the first months of government refugee resettlement as “a quagmire of confusion.” Conflicting messages were exchanged within all levels of government. To fully comprehend these conflicting messages, it is helpful to examine the period from a top-down perspective. Originally, President Jimmy Carter expected that the refugees could be handled by several centers close to Miami, Florida. However, the larger-than-expected influx of refugees, coupled with INS officials working slowly to resettle them, created the need for refugee redistribution.¹⁰⁵ As the crisis spread beyond the confines of Miami, the Departments of Defense, Justice, State, Treasury, Transportation, and Health and Human Services all became directly involved with the logistics of transporting refugees. As new refugee camps opened across the country, FEMA became the organizing committee to instruct these federal departments.

Due to the large influx of people, combined with a lack of official guidance, the stay for these refugees was more akin to a prison sentence. The refugees originally thought they would be placed with Volunteer Agency sponsors within a few weeks. However, for many, the process would last six months to a year.¹⁰⁶ After filling several large facilities, FEMA made the decision to relocate refugees across the country to several military facilities. The physical organization and procedures for moving tens of thousands of refugees across the United States became a challenge that FEMA could

¹⁰⁵ Kami, Hideaki. *Diplomacy Meets Migration: U.S. Relations with Cuba During the Cold War*. New York, NY, U.S.A: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pg. 164.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* Pg. 164.

hardly handle. A 1981 Cuban Haitian Task Force after action report found that FEMA was successful in terms of establishing cities within military bases across the country. However, due to overworked employees--some working 16-20 hours per day--basic needs for the refugees were not met. Necessities like clothing, food, water, and activities often were not provided for the refugees.¹⁰⁷ It was the FEMA and military mishandling of the situation that led the refugees to demand “*Libertad!*” on June 1, 1980.

In response to heightened media coverage, and immigrants protesting the military camp conditions, the INS under the direction of President Carter began investigating political dissidence at refugee camps throughout June of 1980. Local INS officials at Fort Chaffee interviewed and requested information from refugees about which individuals started the Fort Smith protest.¹⁰⁸ While the exact number of protestors remains unclear, the INS reported to FEMA on June 19th, 1980, that 1,127 Cubans were placed in federal detention centers by June 19th, 1980.¹⁰⁹ This number marks the total amount of Cuban incarcerated in all US facilities. A June 12th, 1980, FEMA memorandum recounted that:

“Officials at Fort Chaffee say that 33 suspected troublemakers will remain in the post stockade at the Cuban refugee center until it becomes economically feasible to send them to Federal detention centers in El Paso, Texas and Atlanta, Georgia. Officials decided to wait and accumulate a full planeload of 40 Cuban refugees for transfer, probably at the end of this week.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Kami, Hideaki. *Diplomacy Meets Migration: U.S. Relations with Cuba During the Cold War*. New York, NY, U.S.A: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pg. 165.

¹⁰⁸ Federal Emergency Management Agency “Memorandum for Jack H. Watson” June 19th, 1980. Washington D.C. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee Collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Pg. 1.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. Pg. 1.

FEMA descriptions did not denote any specifics about the refugees, simply that they were “troublemakers.” From Fort Chaffee, fourteen were sent to federal prisons the morning of June 19th alone.¹¹¹ Technically speaking, these refugees were still considered “Cuban-Haitian Entrants: Status Pending,” meaning the U.S. government placed these refugees in prison against international treaties. INS classified these individuals as violent criminals, political terrorists, and “troublemakers.” While no action was immediately taken, in the coming years political committees would challenge the legality of imprisoning these refugees with little proof of their involvement. Even for the refugees that were not sent to federal prisons, their temporary home soon became a detention center in and of itself. Under the direction of Governor Bill Clinton, Fort Chaffee became an epicenter for severe violations of autonomy and human rights.

Refugee Camps to Detention Centers

Shortly after the protest, Governor Bill Clinton visited Fort Chaffee, not to talk to the refugees interned there, but rather to inspect security conditions on the base. *The Crossroads* reported on the visit, stating that the governor inspected Battery A. 2/142d Field Artillery Brigade on patrol duty around the base. Soldiers were photographed lined up on the border of Fort Chaffee, listening to Clinton speak. For Governor Clinton, refugee unrest could not have come at a worse time for his political career. In just a few months, his Arkansas constituents would vote on his reelection. Many of them were extremely unhappy with his handling of Fort Chaffee and the refugees. Hundreds of

¹¹¹ Federal Emergency Management Agency “Memorandum for John W. Macy” June 12th, 1980. Washington D.C. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee Collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1. Pg. 1.

letters (some vulgar) poured into Clinton's office, blaming him for the unrest at Chaffee.¹¹² Governor Clinton promised the people of Arkansas between 650 and 2,000 National Guard troops from neighboring states in a speech following the protest.¹¹³ A June 2nd, 1980 FEMA memorandum to John Macy stated, "Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas stated the Chaffee riots could have been provoked by agents of Cuban President Castro."¹¹⁴ In a thirty-minute press interview the day after the protest, Clinton promised to "plug the hole" outside of Fort Chaffee. Additionally, Clinton promised more Arkansas State Marshalls and officially activated the National Guard.¹¹⁵ The press release confirmed that Clinton believed Cuban "saboteurs" were mainly responsible for the unrest. "Some progress has been made, but I am unsatisfied how it has progressed," Clinton stated in a speech to the people of Fort Smith.¹¹⁶ In this speech, Clinton's tone was extremely aggravated, blaming the federal government for lack of resources. "We are going to stay on top of this. We are going to do everything humanly possible to protect the people in this area."¹¹⁷ It is clear through this announcement and the official FEMA memorandum that Governor Clinton was mainly concerned with the happiness of his constituents, and creating safety for the community, no matter the cost to the refugees. The governor ended the speech with "Let's send them back to where they came from!"¹¹⁸

¹¹² Clinton Foundation Archive: Box 1, folders 15-23 and Box 2 folders 1-4.

¹¹³ Federal Emergency Management Agency "Memorandum for John W. Macy" June 2nd, 1980. Washington D.C. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee Collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Clinton, Bill "Fort Chaffee Speech" Fort Smith, Arkansas. 1980. University of Arkansas, Little Rock CALS Program Online Archive.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. Approximately 00:11:30.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. Approximately 00:30:00.

Governor Clinton's campaign promises pandered to the xenophobic outcries of his constituents more than the human rights of refugees in his own state.

On the ground, military personnel under the direction of Governor Clinton created security measures that rivaled prison and penitentiary security. First, every refugee was given a large index-size identification card with their full name and photograph. These identification markers were required to be worn at all times on the base following the incident. According to a Fort Chaffee security map, the entire perimeter of the main camp and barracks area was surrounded by a double-wide fence of concertina wire.¹¹⁹

Typically reserved for prisons, this razor-sharp wire is designed to not let anyone in or out, causing impalements and other serious deep cuts to the flesh when coming into direct contact. The interior of the refugee area was surrounded by a "10-foot chain link double bayonet top with concertina."¹²⁰ Five members of the Company B 299th Engineer Battalion were responsible for placing 2,100 feet of chain link barbed wire fencing within 5 days after the protest. The men received Army Commendation Medals from the Army Task force commander Brigadier General James Drummond.¹²¹ However, there was even more security than the map suggested.

¹¹⁹ "Cuban Haitian Task Force Chaffee Security Map" Unknown date. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996*. 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Unknown Author. "Pulling Together" *The Crossroads*, Ft. Smith, Arkansas June 5th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996*., 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1. Pg. 5.



Figure 2 “Unknown image” From the Charles Lee Hughes Photograph Collection. Three refugees stare at the photographer. Kites typically represent a fun activity, but the solemn expressions on their faces tell another story. Note the concertina wire, and razor wire topping the inner fence.

An undated photo (Figure 2) of three male refugees shows a picture of the inner fence perimeter, demonstrating not only a 10-foot-tall chain link fence, but two rows of barbed wire, then concertina wire on the top of the chain link fencing. Ironically, the center refugee holds a kite with a bald eagle that reads “AMERICAN” as he stares into the camera.¹²² In the background of the image, anti-personnel rolls of razor-sharp concertina wire also encircle the inside of the fence on the ground, preventing any

¹²² “Unknown Image” 1980-1981, Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. Charles Lee Hughes Photograph Collection, University of Arkansas, Little Rock MC 2250 Box 1, Folder 25.

attempt to climb the fence. This style of razor wire was typically deployed as a defensive measure outside of trenches in active war zones. Perimeter sweeps by armed National Guard personnel occurred 7 days a week, 24 hours a day after the protests.¹²³ The patrols were not equipped with firearms, both to prevent potential accidents and to reinforce the idea that the refugees were not interned. However, each patrol had access to the Fort Chaffee armory filled with firearms, as well as a rapid response team also on call 24/7.

Each guard member on patrol was equipped with a 4-foot-long wooden baton, riot helmet with face shield, and a gas mask worn on the hip in case of riot control tear gas.¹²⁴ Governor Clinton made a point to get Federal guidance regarding the powers each National Guard member had in terms of interactions with refugees. Patrols could use any non-lethal act to detain would-be escapees, including physical restraint, baton hits, rubber bullets, and tear gas.¹²⁵

Increased security not only included physical security measures and increased patrols, but also direct involvement by military personnel in the everyday lives of Cuban refugees. Governor Clinton ordered the National Guard to search and sweep the refugee barracks shortly after the press talk on June 2nd, 1980. FEMA, Governor Clinton, and military personnel believed that refugees carried with them contraband including drugs, knives, homemade liquor stills, and handmade firearms.¹²⁶ Many refugees opposed these

¹²³ Cuban Haitian Task Force, "Overview" Unknown Date, Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1.

¹²⁴ Harris, Bob. "Army regulars battle tedium, heat to provide security" *The Crossroads*, Ft. Smith, Arkansas June 26th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1. Pg. 1.

¹²⁵ Rosenberg, Emily & Fitzpatrick, Shanon. *Body and Nation: The Global Realm of U.S. Body Politics in the Twentieth Century*. Duke University Press, 2014. Pg. 250.

¹²⁶ Kami, Hideaki. *Diplomacy Meets Migration: U.S. Relations with Cuba During the Cold War*. New York, NY, U.S.A: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pg. 165.

searches as a direct violation of their personal autonomy and privacy. A photo of a refugee barrack at Fort Chaffee (Figure 3) shows 12 refugees resisting one such search attempt.¹²⁷ The men in the photo stood firm, blocking the entry to the barracks building,



Figure 3 “Image 418” from the Charles Lee Hughes Photograph Collection. Notice the two National Guards with their back to the camera, holding large batons. The guard on the right side of the photo has the string wrapped around his hand, prepared to use the weapon. The refugees of this barrack seem to be arguing with the guards who are attempting to search their quarters.

with their arms crossed. One figure wearing a striped shirt stands in the center of the photo, apparently arguing with the National Guard. In the foreground, two fully

¹²⁷ “Image 418” 1980-1981, Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. Charles Lee Hughes Photograph Collection, University of Arkansas, Little Rock MC 2250 Box 1, Folder 25.

uniformed National Guardsmen watch on with riot batons fully drawn, waiting to beat the refugees if necessary.¹²⁸

While the National Guard and military personnel stationed at Fort Chaffee were acting under direct orders of Governor Bill Clinton, their personal opinions on the refugees largely mimicked the larger Arkansas community. *The Crossroads* published interviews with soldiers, getting their thoughts and interpretations of being stationed at Fort Chaffee. As refugees began to come onto the base, these shifted from indirect content surrounding training procedures, to their thoughts and opinions on the refugees themselves. One interview on June 5th, 1980, asked, “In your opinion... Do you think the Cubans should be sent back?” First Lieutenant Fred Spencer of the Arkansas National Guard answered, “I sure do! I don’t think it’s right for the people to put up with this...It’s costing too much money.”¹²⁹ While most of the other personnel weren’t as decisive as Lieutenant Spencer, the other four interviewees agreed. Many felt that the refugees who behaved should still get a chance at citizenship, while those who caused trouble should be deported.¹³⁰ Tensions continued to flair at Fort Chaffee, between increased security and surprise searches of barracks. The refugees began to feel further isolated from not only Cuba but from the American community that was supposed to be their new home. Governor Clinton, President Carter, and their respective staff knew that the refugee

¹²⁸ “Image 418.” 1980-1981, Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. Charles Lee Hughes Photograph Collection, University of Arkansas, Little Rock MC 2250 Box 1, Folder 25.

¹²⁹ Unknown Author. “In your opinion...Do you think the Cubans should be sent back?” *The Crossroads*, Ft. Smith, Arkansas June 5th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1. Pg. 2.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 2.

camps were severely disorganized. Some National Guardsmen regarded the refugees as a serious threat and treated them as such.

A Secret Prison

By early June 1980, several groups began to suspect discrimination and mistreatment of refugees interned at US government facilities. The Spanish American League Against Discrimination (SALAD) requested that its representatives be allowed to visit the refugee camps in order to inspect the living conditions. While this report was attached to the June 12th letter of El Campo Libertad at Elgin Air Force base, the Spanish American League Against Discrimination argued that their recommendations should be applied to all internment facilities. The report detailed camp specific observations, including living conditions, staffing, and physical needs of the refugees.¹³¹ The first and most pressing recommendations were three meals per day. Eglin Air Force Base and other facilities were only offering two meals a day. The Spanish American League Against Discrimination recommended a rumor control network and dissemination of information to quell false news from spreading throughout the camp, causing chaos. Under this section, the team recommended simply that staff should “Be sensitive to the needs of Cuban Refugees.”¹³² Though a basic requirement, the investigation committee found that the information they were being given was contradictory, confusing, and often times simply not enough.¹³³ Similar to Fort Chaffee, communication with people outside

¹³¹ SALAD Assessment Team, “A Comprehensive Report of “El Campo de la Libertad.” Elgin Air Force Base, Miami, FL. June 5th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175. Box 1.

¹³² Ibid. Pg. 9.

¹³³ Ibid. Pg. 10.

the camps was only available through special request. The Spanish American League Against Discrimination recommended the installation of public phones. Besides these more pressing issues, the Spanish American League Against Discrimination stated that, “Boredom is an outstanding feature of Camp life.”¹³⁴ During FEMA’s handling of resettlement, no activities had been provided, just shelter, food, and processing facilities. The report noted the lack of culturally relevant pastimes and recommended that double-nine dominos be provided to the refugees, Cafe con Leche (Cuban coffee) should be provided at all times of day, and, most importantly, a fully bilingual staff. Representatives from the League also found that there was an extreme lack of correspondence with FEMA throughout the process of inspection.¹³⁵ The League contacted FEMA numerous times after the original tour of Elgin Air Force Base to provide these recommendations, however the office of Tom Casey, the FEMA director, insisted that all staff were unable to meet with the team to discuss findings. The Spanish American League Against Discrimination was forced to mail the report to Tom Casey directly and hope for improvements.¹³⁶ While FEMA largely did not implement these recommendations, a new federal bureaucracy made recommendations from the Leagues’ report a priority.

FEMA was largely blamed internally for the events of June 1st following INS and military investigations. In July, President Carter created The Cuban Haitian Task Force (CHTF) and removed FEMA from overseeing the immigration process. The task force

¹³⁴ SALAD Assessment Team, “A Comprehensive Report of “El Campo de la Libertad.” Elgin Air Force Base, Miami, FL. June 5th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175. Box 1. Pg. 11.

¹³⁵ Ibid. Pg. 1.

¹³⁶ Ibid. Pg. 1.

was created specifically to oversee the entirety of the Cuban and Haitian immigration operation on a national level. This organization was given intergovernmental authority on the processing and resettlement of Cuban and Haitian refugees.¹³⁷ At the time, Fort Chaffee had the largest number of Cuban exiles on site, so the task force was located on base. The head of the task force, Barbara Lawson, reported directly to Victor Palmieri, the coordinator of refugee affairs within the State Department, and Eugene Eidenberg, Deputy Assistant to the President for Intergovernmental Affairs.¹³⁸ Barbara Lawson pursued a policy of helping the refugees while simultaneously working within local communities. With increased funding and staff, as well as more direct communication to President Jimmy Carter, the Cuban Haitian Task Force was able to overhaul the image of the camp to both the refugees and surrounding communities. The Cuban Haitian Task Force created an official image of a fun, pro-American environment in which the refugees could learn about American culture. Numerous activities, educational courses, and reading materials, were provided to the refugees. Officials tried to create not only a more equitable environment for refugees, but also a network to instill traditional American values within the refugee community at Fort Chaffee.

The Cuban Haitian Task Force's first goal was to resettle the refugees with sponsors through Volunteer Agency networks. Sponsorship was only possible if refugees acted calmly, followed American values, and listened to instructions by American officials. Communication and language became the clear divide between FEMA, army personnel, and the refugees. During the transition of power, the Cuban Haitian Task

¹³⁷ Eckstein, Susan. *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pg. 97.

¹³⁸ Ibid. Pg. 97.

Force and FEMA enlisted Puerto Rican National Guard troops to attempt to bridge the language gap and provide better communication between the refugees and camp staff.¹³⁹ Additional bilingual staff were brought in so refugees could ask questions regarding their stay. Refugees were encouraged to participate in English classes at the base; however, this was not mandatory. Many of the troops stationed on the base were not bilingual, making communication extremely difficult, especially in times of crisis. The Cuban Haitian Task Force issued 3" x 5" notecards that were printed with common phrases and distributed throughout the base to all personnel. Each card had three columns: English, Spanish, and Pronunciation, a quick reference guide in case of emergency. Many of the translations were words or commands. "Stop, walk faster, Follow the line, Sign here, Why, and Military police."¹⁴⁰ Additionally, the card included pleasantries such as good morning and good evening. The Cuban Haitian Task Force hoped the cards would provide clarity between English-speaking troops and Spanish-speaking refugees. By bridging this divide, it helped instill more trust between refugees and military personnel.

Besides presenting bilingual outlets for refugees to voice their concerns, the Cuban Haitian Task Force needed to establish a sense of community between Americans and the Mariel refugees. Three Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) units were enlisted to offer translations for the National Guard and keep refugees feeling welcomed and happy rather than imprisoned. The units were responsible for creating and censoring the only news outlets available to refugees at Fort Chaffee: a newspaper titled *La Vida Nueva*

¹³⁹ Montgomery, Judy, "Bilingual MPs provide 'humane but firm' support" *The Crossroads*, Ft. Smith, Arkansas June 5th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1. Pg. 1.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. Pg. 1.

and KNJB radio station 92.7 FM. Each of these two outlets enlisted the help of refugees to write stories, take photographs, and highlight social events. However, Psychological Operations editors made sure the information was not overly political and upheld American traditions valued by Volunteer Agency sponsors.¹⁴¹ By early June, reports indicated that *La Vida Nueva* was the sixth largest newspaper in Arkansas.¹⁴² While *La Vida Nueva* was originally a Spanish-only newspaper, shortly after the June 1st protests the paper went to bilingual publishing. The paper claimed that this was to promote learning English, but internal reports from the Cuban Haitian Task Force showed that this was to increase the ability to quickly censor stories and reports. This also allowed higher up, non-bilingual officials to be able to proof the paper at will.

Using the names of refugees on the base, publication of the paper in Spanish originally, and promotion of a refugee perspective on ‘camp life’ gave refugees a community that bonded strangers together. *La Vida Nueva* published stories surrounding successful sponsorship and steps toward freedom giving Cuban refugees hope that the process would be expedited and that they would receive immigration papers any day. *La Vida Nueva* also helped promote pro-capitalist ideals while continually reaffirming the dangers of communism. A Psychological Operations editor for the paper, John Mullins, stressed to *The Crossroads* “We have always included news about the activities of the Soviet Union because they really haven’t been exposed to the real story.”¹⁴³ Stories

¹⁴¹ Alverson, Tom, “PSYOPS abridges language gap” *The Crossroads*, Ft. Smith, Arkansas June 12th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1. Pg. 5.

¹⁴² Ibid. Pg. 5.

¹⁴³ Olson, Diana “Vida Nueva, KNJA continue providing new joys” *The Crossroads*, Ft. Smith, Arkansas August 7th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1. Pg. 3.

surrounding the Cold War suggested a U.S. dominance on the world stage.



Figure 4 “Los Abuelos Cubanos de Fort Chaffee” or “Image 613” from the Charles Lee Hughes Photograph Collection and published in *La Vida Nueva*. These refugees hold signs in reference to the dangers of communism, and praising the Arkansas community, and U.S. citizens for their support.

La Vida Nueva published stories that instructed refugees how to act in accordance with traditional American values, offering one viewpoint on what it meant to be American. An article in the pre-Thanksgiving edition of *La Vida Nueva* filled the back page with a massive black and white photo titled, “Los ‘Abuelos’ Cubanos de Fort Chaffee Manifiestan su Interpretación del ‘Thanksgiving’”¹⁴⁴ Five elderly men in the

¹⁴⁴ Translates to “The Cuban ‘Grandpas’ of Fort Chaffee express their interpretation of ‘Thanksgiving.’”

front of the photo (Figure 4) held a large, hand painted sign reading “Muera el Comunismo.”¹⁴⁵ Three more signs were in the background, painted in English reading “Thanks to the American People!!” “The Communism it’s ‘cancer’ for peoples,” and “Hurrah U.S.A. Champion of the straight human.” The final sign used the Christian cross as the letter ‘t’ in “the” and “straight.”¹⁴⁶ While these signs were created and organized by ten elderly Cubans, the event was noticeably staged to be included in the paper. The background was devoid of the typically numerous amounts of refugees walking the premises. By filtering and curating specific content for the refugees to see, through the perspective of a minority, the Psychological Operations Units in charge of the paper shifted perspectives to develop a pro-U.S. narrative.

The Thanksgiving issue of *La Vida Nueva* filled the pages, not with refugee stories, but rather with information about what the refugees should be doing on Thanksgiving to behave like traditional Americans. One article (Figure 5) accompanied by a photo of Barbara Lawson at her desk, was titled “Mensaje de Barbara Lawson a los Cubanos con Motivo del Dia Dar Gracias”¹⁴⁷ The article described the history of the Pilgrims landing on Plymouth Rock and the first Thanksgiving.¹⁴⁸ Lawson compared the refugees to these first Americans, calling the refugees a new inspiration to the nation. The

¹⁴⁵ Translates to “Death to Communism”

¹⁴⁶ Unknown author, “Los ‘Abuelos’ Cubanos de Fort Chaffee Manifiestan su Interpretacion del ‘Thanksgiving’” November 27th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 5.

¹⁴⁷ Translates to: “Message from Barbara Lawson for the Occasion of Thanksgiving”

¹⁴⁸ Lawson, Barbara, “Mensaje de Barbara Lawson a los Cubanos con Motivo del Dia Dar Gracias” November 27th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 2.

article further detailed the voyage of the Mayflower and how the Pilgrims were also immigrants looking for “Nueva Vida.”¹⁴⁹

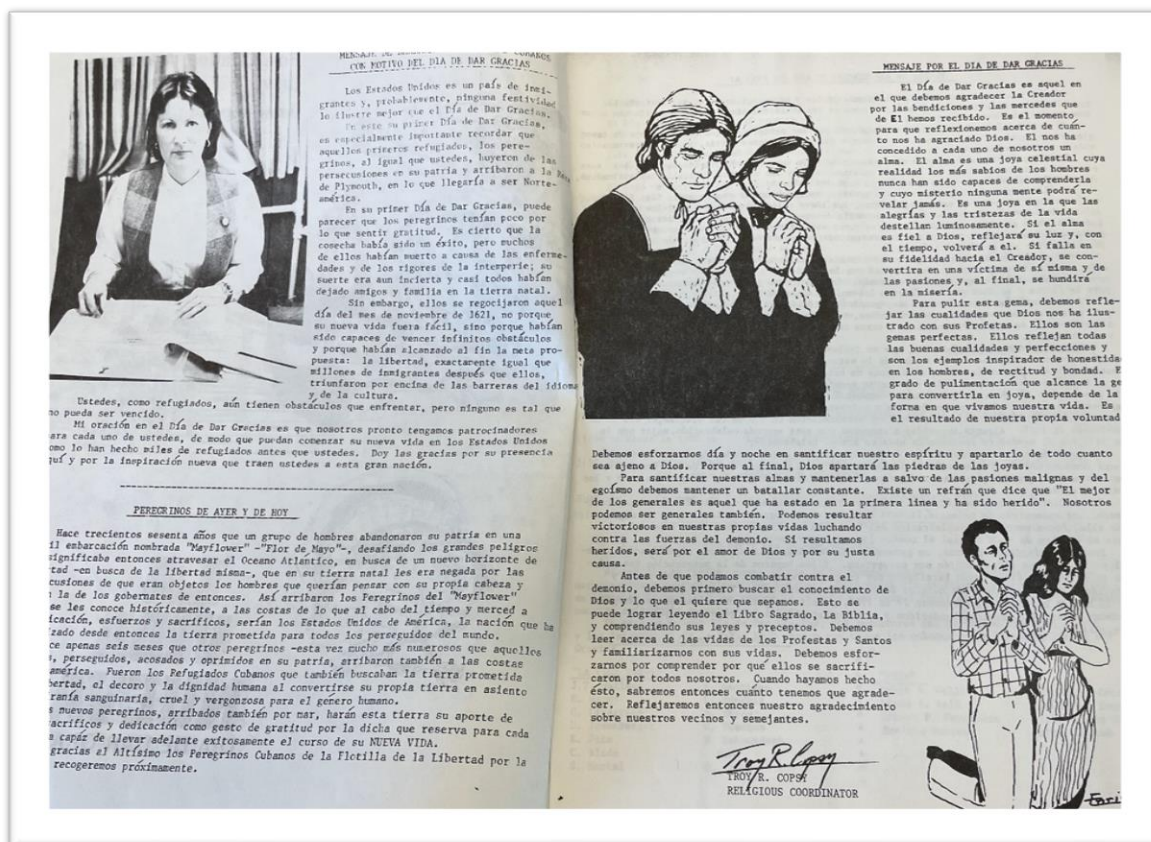


Figure 5 “La Vida Nueva November 27th, 1980” from the Cuban Heritage Collection. The two-page spread shows the traditional values, and directly compares refugees to Puritans. Fort Chaffee’s religious coordinator draws an obvious comparison between being a good U.S. citizen with prayer.

The next page showed two large drawings by a Cuban refugee. The top drawing showed two pilgrims, a man and a woman, both praying in traditional Puritan outfits.

Underneath, two refugees were drawn in 1980s American fashion, including a collared shirt tucked into slacks for the man, and the woman in a dress.¹⁵⁰ The modern pair of

¹⁴⁹ Lawson, Barbara, “Mensaje de Barbara Lawson a los Cubanos con Motivo del Dia Dar Gracias” November 27th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996., 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 2.

¹⁵⁰ Copsy, Troy, “Mensaje por el dia de Dar Gracias.” November 27th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996., 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 3.

refugees were on their knees, praying, almost identically to the pilgrims above them. The message on the adjacent page read “Mensaje por el dia de Dar Gracias.”¹⁵¹ The camp’s religious coordinator, Troy Copsy, told the refugees how to pray, giving them instructions to thank the Creator for their blessings. The article further illustrated a struggle between God and the Devil, suggesting refugees should reference scripture and the Bible to further prepare themselves for this spiritual fight.¹⁵²

The front page of the Thanksgiving issue (Figure 6) showed a similar drawn duality. On the top left side, illustrations of pilgrims eating with Native Americans were contrasted with an image of Cuban refugees arriving in Key West, Florida walking off of a boardwalk. The background included several more allusions to Christianity. Each of the four boats in the picture show a single, cross shaped mast, without sails. These messages all reinforced the idea of Thanksgiving, not just as a time of gathering, but rather a Christian holiday that upheld traditional American values. The full-page message from the camp’s religious coordinator further linked the holiday to Christian spirituality. Drawings of Puritans next to refugees in the same prayer position illustrated proper behaviors, attitudes, clothing, and religion associated with a good American life. When looked at as a whole, the Thanksgiving edition linked God and the Christian faith as one of the reasons for refugees finding America. The ships’ masts as crosses reinforced that refugees should be thanking the Christian God for their arrival in America.

¹⁵¹ Translates to: “Message for Thanksgiving.”

¹⁵² Copsy, Troy, “Mensaje por el dia de Dar Gracias.” November 27th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996., 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 3

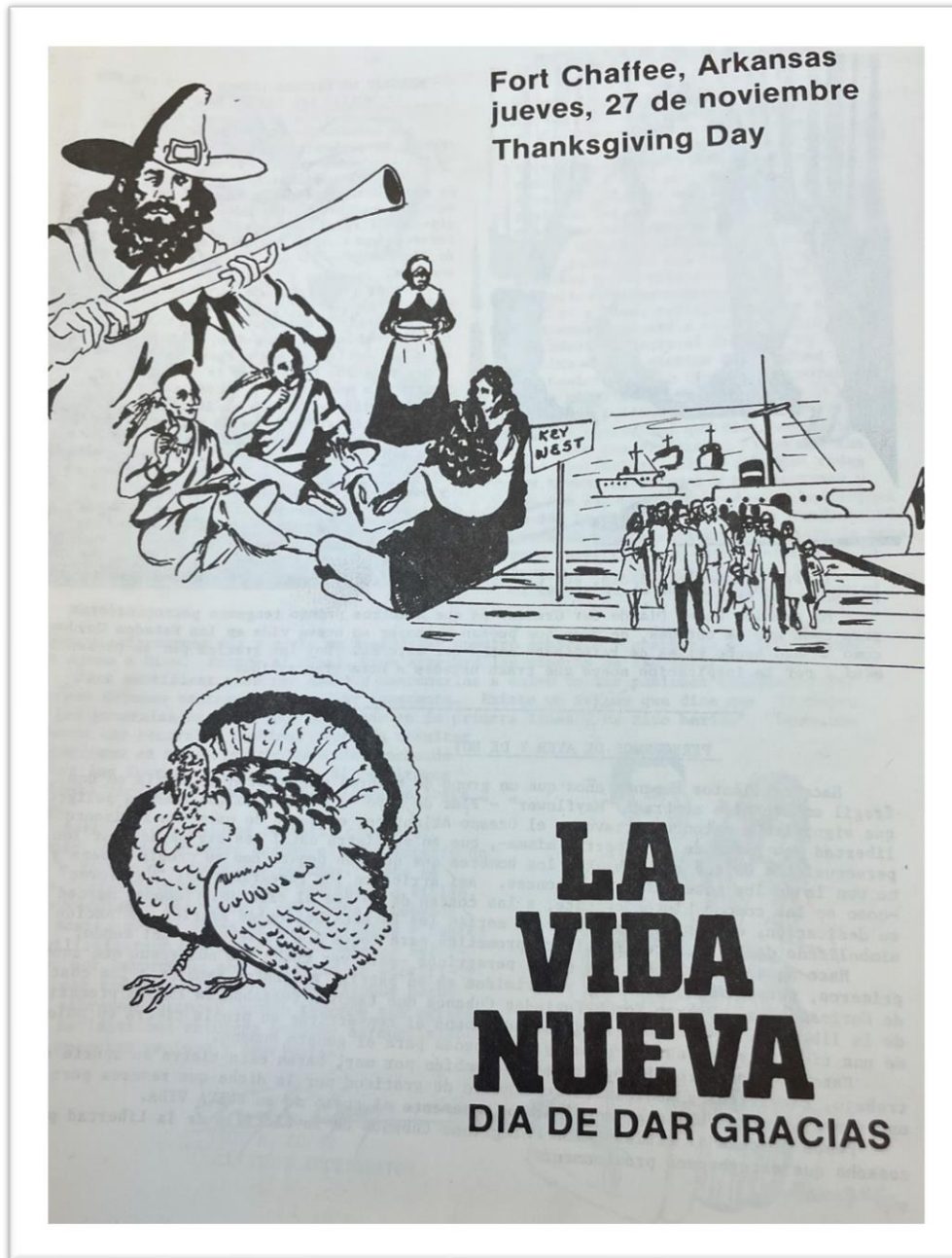


Figure 6 “*La Vida Nueva* November 27th, 1980” from the Cuban Heritage Collection. The front cover of the Thanksgiving issue shows a similar duality between early colonists, and Cuban refugees. By showing a side-by-side comparison of “the first Thanksgiving” and Cuban refugees arriving in Key West, Florida, newspaper editors and task force staff reinforced traditional American values. Notice the unusual, cross shaped masts on the boats.

Overall, many government officials held preconceived notions of the refugees as violent criminals and feared further political unrest. After the protest of June 1st, 1980,

officials knew that they could not fully suppress the refugee population of 20,000 if another similar protest broke out. Through a reorganization of FEMA responsibilities to the newly formed Cuban Haitian Task Force, and implementations of the Spanish American League Against Discrimination suggestions, officials were able to create a slightly more hospitable environment for refugees. Through bilingualism, newspapers, and community events, the Cuban Haitian Task Force attempted to create both a calm environment while also attempting to indoctrinate refugees into traditional Christian American values. However, large, barbed wire fencing continued to tell another story of continual fear of those who do not share these same American values. Behind the scenes, the camp remained ready for another protest, with a fully stocked armory, increased defenses, and more soldiers on the ground. The refugees were imprisoned physically; however, many did not let government or community perspectives affect their true identities.

Chapter 2: Cuban Perspectives

After hearing promises of the greatness of the United States from friends, neighbors, and community members who immigrated to America, many Cuban refugees felt disappointed by the immigration system established for their arrival. Promises of prosperity from previous generations of émigrés did not apply to them. Furthermore, what originally promised to be weeks of immigration soon dragged on into months of limbo. After Miami became too occupied with increasing numbers of refugees, these people were then treated as an inconvenience, loaded onto planes and buses, and redistributed across the country. A Cuban Haitian Task Force subcommittee report wrote

out the procedure for each transportation operation. Military Police provided an armed perimeter around planes as they landed, while U.S. Marshalls assisted. The INS would perform baggage and ‘alien’ body searches before entering the plane and exiting the plane.¹⁵³ Additionally, two Border Patrol officers were stationed on every flight for security. FAA Sky Marshalls would assist in armed security in route to Fort Chaffee. Before the flight, all transportees were logged with Volunteer Agencies, with information on their sex, marital status, and security category.¹⁵⁴ Once off of the airplane, they would be loaded onto a bus, which then was accompanied by an armored military convoy. Figure 7 is a photo of the first full flight of 128 refugees departing the plane at Fort Chaffee.¹⁵⁵ Military, INS, and other government agency personnel stood waiting. Refugees entered a walkway and were immediately placed onto a waiting bus. After their arrival at the enclosed portion of Fort Chaffee, security assisted refugees to a facility, where they were given large ID tags. The notecard sized, full color IDs had the refugees’ name, sex, and photo boldly printed to be easily identified by army or government personnel. For many refugees, this did not feel like a warm welcome, but rather a prison sentence. Their immigration became a punishment, and a form of persecution rather than safety.

¹⁵³ Cuban Haitian Task Force, “Flight Procedure” Unknown date, Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1, Folder 5.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ “1st Flight of Cuban Refugees” 1980-1981, Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. Charles Lee Hughes Photograph Collection, University of Arkansas, Little Rock MC 2250 Box 1, Folder 30.



Figure 7 “First Flight of Cuban Refugees” from the Charles Lee Hughes Photograph Collection. Refugees depart from a plane and immediately board a bus to take them into the secure area inside of Fort Chaffee. Many seem tired from the flight and their relocation proceeding. However, one stands at the top of the plane, waving, seemingly excited to arrive at Chaffee.

Originally, FEMA officials at Fort Chaffee withheld information from Cuban refugees and limited their access to the outside world. Refugees were locked on a military base, in an unfamiliar place, with no information and nothing to do. The population at Fort Chaffee was roughly 80% men and 20% women, with a small number of families.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Cuban Haitian Task Force, “Overview” Unknown Date, Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1.

Unlike previous generations of Cuban exiles, the *Marielito* population was 18% “non-white.”¹⁵⁷ Single male refugees lived in barracks, with around 50 people per floor.¹⁵⁸ Families received a partitioned space in separate barracks. Each entrant was given two sets of clothes and provided basic food and cleanliness items.¹⁵⁹ Before the June 1st protest, there was nothing for refugees to do except talk and spread rumors from their lack of information. According to INS, these rumors spread like wildfire. One suggested that Fidel Castro had been assassinated.¹⁶⁰ Another suggested that the Bahamas had invaded Cuba.¹⁶¹ By May 1980, the refugees were tired of being pushed aside by both the Cuban government and now the U.S. government. They came to the United States to avoid persecution, and now many felt as though they were back in Cuban prisons.

Cuban refugees at Fort Chaffee had enough of the internment and disregard for their autonomy. “*Libertad! Libertad!*” expresses quite clearly what the refugees wanted: freedom. For the refugees, their freedom had been promised and assured throughout the immigration process to the United States. However, the immigration process for the Cuban refugees took months, and sometimes years rather than a few weeks. Furthermore, their transfer to military bases across the country only added to the feeling of incarceration rather than freedom. As the refugees protested their incarceration on June

¹⁵⁷ Fernandez, Gaston A. “Race, Gender, and Class in the Persistence of the Mariel Stigma Twenty Years after the Exodus from Cuba.” *The International Migration Review* 41, no. 3 (2007) Pgs. 612-613. See also Guerrero, Perla Guerra, Perla. *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pg. 80

¹⁵⁸ Cuban Haitian Task Force, “Overview” Unknown Date, Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ INS, “Staff Conference” May 22nd, 1980. Unknown location. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

1st, 1980, police gassed, beat, and shot at them.¹⁶² Arkansans shouted racist slurs and attempted to beat them. As the refugees fled back toward the base, they toppled guardhouses and burned buildings, throwing chunks of concrete and rocks at police. As the refugees were herded into fencing and sealed in by police, many individuals were arrested and sent to federal detention centers by INS officials. The privilege they were promised became a prison sentence.

With increased security and the takeover of camp operations by the Cuban Haitian Task Force, many refugees settled into their unfortunate imprisonment. Based on the June 1980 Spanish League Against Discrimination report, and increased funding, arrangements were made to keep the Cuban population occupied. The Cuban Haitian Task Force knew that they needed to promote the idea that Cubans were free and welcomed in the United States in order to facilitate quick sponsorship. Soon after, Spanish magazines, a library, and a camp newspaper, *La Vida Nueva*, were provided to the refugees to quell misinformation. Food became increasingly available, including snacks, Cuban coffee, and cigarettes. Entertainment was provided in the form of music venues, movie theaters, and sporting areas, including football, soccer, and baseball. Workshops and classes were provided to refugees to teach them skills that could, in theory, be used once they gained sponsorship and worked towards citizenship. While these systems were originally put in place to mask the reality of imprisonment, they were also an attempt to transform refugees into a more typically American population. However, refugees mainly rejected these ideas. Through analysis of each of these

¹⁶² Stevens, Alexander, “*I Hope They Don’t Come to Plains: Race and Detention of Mariel Cubans (1980-1981)*.” The University of Georgia, Master of Arts Thesis. Gamarra, Eduardo interview with Alexander Stevens. Pg. 51.

extracurricular camp activities, it becomes clear that, like previous generations of Cuban exiles, *Marielitos* wanted similar freedoms and a remaking of a land lost, the creation of a new Cuba.

Imprisonment of People, Freedom of Personality

Due to the large population at Fort Chaffee, it is almost impossible to accurately depict every refugee's individual experience. However, through the analysis of collective activities and events, cultural patterns and group identities become clear. Whereas the Cubans of Miami tried to replicate a remembered place, Cubans at Fort Chaffee created something entirely different; an image of what they hoped Cuba would become, a place where they had freedom to express themselves like never before. Though the Arkansas community, government officials, and Volunteer Agency sponsors were unhappy with the refugees putting forward non-traditional personalities, refugees continued to create honest versions of themselves.

For many, the main way to express their individuality was through their living spaces. Between May and October of 1980, the population at Fort Chaffee dwindled to around 6,000 people from its peak of around 20,000. During this time, more 'hard to deal with' cases began being placed at Fort Chaffee to the dismay of Governor Bill Clinton.¹⁶³ The restructuring of internees at Fort Chaffee kept the population numbers much smaller than before, which allowed for more room in between personal spaces. Now with about 1/4th of the population, barracks housed around 12 people each, meaning each individual more or less got their own space within these large buildings. Volunteer Agency

¹⁶³ Stevens, Alexander, "*I Hope They Don't Come to Plains: Race and Detention of Mariel Cubans (1980-1981)*". The University of Georgia, Master of Arts Thesis. Pg. 82.

coordinators and government officials themselves had responded to questions from the refugees regarding their now obvious extended stay. This group of remaining Cuban exiles knew that their stay was going to be extended either due to the color of their skin, sexual identity, criminal record, or personality.¹⁶⁴ As such, they began to settle into camp life. Figure 8, an undated photo shows one of these spaces. An unnamed refugee sweeps the floor of his space.¹⁶⁵



Figure 8 “Photo album” from the Cuban Heritage Collection. A refugee sweeps his room. The walls are decorated with ripped pages from magazines and Styrofoam cups, showing that refugees were given a limited supply of personal items.

¹⁶⁴ Stevens, Alexander, *“I Hope They Don’t Come to Plains: Race and Detention of Mariel Cubans (1980-1981). The University of Georgia, Master of Arts Thesis. Gamarra, Eduardo interview with Alexander Stevens. Pg. 82.*

¹⁶⁵ “Photo Album” University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. MC 5175, Box 2.

The walls are filled almost floor to ceiling with relics he accumulated on base. Many of these decorations are ripped pages from magazines. These are usually photos of people, and some are even pornographic in nature. Above one nude photo, a small cut out representation of Jesus looks over his bed. A small, makeshift table sits on top of his bed, to make it easier to sweep.

On the cloth covered fixture, you can see the very few items he was able to bring from Cuba. Though hard to make out, a picture frame suggests family or friends in remembrance. Even the window has been claimed, covered in drawing from presumed arts and crafts activities on base. Though this may seem unique, numerous other examples of refugee decorations demonstrate each person's unique interests and personality. This maximalist decoration style is representative of a new identity, and accumulation of items as wealth, something that was prohibited in Castro's Cuba. Though ripped photos have little to no monetary value, they hold representative meaning as the first possessions refugees could own in the United States. These displays could also represent an identification of their new lives within the United States, a celebration of their new personal identities within Fort Chaffee, and America. These decorations are representative of a newfound freedom. Specifically pornographic images are representative of another form of freedom, an open expression of sexual identity.

While the Arkansas community and base newspapers suppressed images of queer people, homosexuality was quite common. An article from the *Arkansas Democrat*, likely a conservative newspaper, suggested that homosexual people were quite open about their sexuality. "Fort Chaffee—The insane who huddle under blankets are sedated lest they cut their wrists to get attention. Homosexuals swish along dusty streets in drag. Single young

women bear children conceived in the American resettlement camp. These are the unwanted Cubans at Fort Chaffee.”¹⁶⁶ While the Arkansas community and Volunteer Agency sponsors found these people to be undesirable, the Cuban refugees were free to express themselves and their newfound autonomy.



Figure 9 “Image 615” From the Charles Lee Hughes Photograph Collection. Two *transformistas* style their hair and apply makeup. The American flag in the corner, next to the mirror offers a symbol of hope for their eventual sponsorship and acceptance in their new country.

¹⁶⁶ Frank White to Rich Williamson, Apr. 20, 1981; Peter Arnett, “Cubans Caught in ‘Beauty, Tragedy’ of System,” *Arkansas Democrat*.

Another undated photo (Figure 9) shows two *transformistas* doing their hair and makeup in front of a mirror.¹⁶⁷ Likely these women were getting ready to go to the nightly disco held on the base. One refugee styles the other's hair while she applies lipstick. They are both wearing feminine outfits; the hairstylist in a dark colored dress wears a large necklace. The other wears a blouse and tight-fitting pants. Noticeably, the walls are also covered in photos from Spanish-language magazines. Though these are all portraits of women, a close examination shows that these are mainly popular style trends among women, including advertisements for lipstick, showing lips up close. One page of an unknown magazine on the wall shows a woman whispering into the ear of a man, and various styles of lingerie obviously in style. Behind a propped mirror there is a small American flag. This image represents the hope these women had to be accepted in both the United States and, more pressingly, within sponsorship networks. Refugees were only issued clothing based on their sex, so these women must have received this clothing through trading with other refugee women. While images such as Figure 9 were never published in traditional news outlets or *La Vida Nueva*, the ability to dress in drag shows an acceptance of gender non-conforming people within the Cuban community at Fort Chaffee.

According to historian of sexuality, Susana Peña, even though people who obviously identified as queer existed at Fort Chaffee, they were censored across most media outlets. 70-80% of Americans in 1980 disapproved of Cuban exiles because of two

¹⁶⁷ "Image 615" 1980-1981, Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. Charles Lee Hughes Photograph Collection, University of Arkansas, Little Rock MC 2250 Box 1, Folder 33.

reasons: supposed criminal activities and homosexuality.¹⁶⁸ “To challenge this negative impression,” Peña argues, “the federal government denied any knowledge or identification of homosexual immigrants in the camp.”¹⁶⁹ Peña estimates that approximately 250-500 openly homosexual Cubans were on base, according to internal INS and Cuban Haitian Task Force archives. The methods for gathering this data were unclear; whether it was through self-reporting outlets, or rather guards making a note each time they saw something “gay.”¹⁷⁰ These distinctions could be Cubans dressing in *transformista* style, trimming their eyebrows, wearing makeup, or some other action. Sexually non-conforming Cubans were segregated into separate dormitories, away from the general population. Susana Peña argues that *transformistas* and homosexual refugees exaggerated their queerness on base not only as a celebration of their freedom, but also as retaliation against their suppression in Cuba. Though the U.S. government filtered out stories of homosexual acts, the refugees continued to present their true identities and their true selves at Fort Chaffee.

While some sexually non-conforming Cubans felt free to express themselves on base, other traditionally censored groups celebrated their true identities in secret. Records show that Santería (or Lucumí), was practiced at Fort Chaffee. This worship included offerings to orishas in the form of foodways.¹⁷¹ Elizabeth Pérez explains the modern version of these offerings best in the edited volume *Religion, Food, and Eating in North*

¹⁶⁸ 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. 3 (2007). Pg. 499

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. Pg. 499.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. Pg. 500.

¹⁷¹ Pérez, Elizabeth. “Crystallizing Subjectivities in the African Diaspora: Sugar, Honey, and the Gods of Afro-Cuban Lucumí.” In *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America*, 175–94. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2015.

America: Sugar, Honey, and the Gods of Lucumí. “By offering food to the orishas, whether on festive occasions or somber ones, practitioners today attempt to cross the divide thought to separate divine Other from human self. Practitioners of Lucumí are taught that the spirits temporarily assume the characteristics of mortals—sensing hunger, thirst, and pleasure—in order to become subjects with whom communities and individuals may interact.”¹⁷² Base officials reported the existence of this practice through forcibly disposing of “rotting foods due to sanitary concerns.”¹⁷³ While Lucumí and Santería based offerings were censored, evidence suggests that the religion took on a new form of worship through musical instruments.

To fully understand this musical religious practice, it is important to understand differences within Afro-Cuban percussion instruments and their implementation. *Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming: Aesthetics, Transmission, Bonding, and Creativity* by Kenneth Schweitzer provides an extremely comprehensive examination of Afro-Cuban drumming, particularly the role of the *batá* drums. These drums come in three different sizes (from smallest to largest): *iya*, *itotele*, and *okonkolo*. In Lucumí, these instruments are used to create rhythmic archetypes called toques. Ethnomusicologists have recorded approximately 140 of these polyrhythmic forms. The toques are used to worship *Santos* (Saints) and *orishas*. Drum ceremonies are then performed, using all three sizes of *batá*, in multiple instrumentation arrangements. Traditionally, members of these drum performances had to be inducted into the religion through an induction ceremony roughly

¹⁷² Pérez, Elizabeth. “Crystallizing Subjectivities in the African Diaspora: Sugar, Honey, and the Gods of Afro-Cuban Lucumí.” In *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America*, 175–94. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2015. Pg. 180.

¹⁷³ Cuban Haitian Task Force, “Overview” Unknown Date, Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1, Pg. 15.

described as "receiving Añá."¹⁷⁴ Once inducted, the ceremony can only be performed on consecrated drums. The head of the drum is made of a non-castrated male deer or goat hide.¹⁷⁵ Then the body of the drum is wrapped together with leather made from the same animal, with certain beads strung around it. *Batá* and other consecrated instruments are sacred and usually do not exist outside of their country of worship. Schweitzer argues that, in certain circumstances, these rituals can be performed outside of these prerequisites, with non-consecrated *batá*.¹⁷⁶ *Aberinkúla*, or non-consecrated *batá* performances, fulfill the need to worship *Santos* or *orishas* on certain religious holidays, while in exile or imprisoned, by substituting consecrated drums with non-consecrated alternatives. Cuban Haitian Task Force reports indicate that Santería was practiced at Fort Chaffee. Photographs of musical performances at the military base, coupled with the Cuban Haitian Task Force report, suggest that Lucumí based religious practices using *Aberinkúla* took place on the base.

¹⁷⁴ Schweitzer, Kenneth George. *The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming: Aesthetics, Transmission, Bonding, and Creativity*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. Pg. 22.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. Pg. 22.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. Pg. 23.



Figure 10 “Grupo musical ‘Los Sublimes’” from *La Vida Nueva* courtesy of the Cuban Heritage Collection. The refugee second from right is holding a *batá*. Immediately to the left of the guitarist in checkered pants, another refugee is playing the *congas*.

A *La Vida Nueva* story from March 23rd, 1981, titled “Grupo Musical ‘Los Sublimes’”¹⁷⁷ showcases one of the many musical groups at Fort Chaffee.¹⁷⁸ While the group (Figure 10) is shown fronted by several electric guitars and a drum set, there is a

¹⁷⁷ The Musical Group “The Sublimes”

¹⁷⁸ Lizarraga, Carlos “Grupo Musical ‘Los Sublimes’” *La Vida Nueva*, March 23rd, 1981. Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 1.

noticeable percussion ensemble behind the group. One man stands up, clearly holding a small to medium sized *batá* and, though harder to make out, five other percussionists play alongside the unnamed performer. One is playing a pair of *congas*, another instrument used in substitution with *bembe*.¹⁷⁹ The article explained that the Cubans were “motivated toward a single goal: making music...they dedicate to performing a varied repertoire of Afro-Cuban and Latin American music.”¹⁸⁰ Perhaps, Cuban musical artists suggested to the Cuban Haitian Task Force that the purchasing of *batá* and *congas* not only to add musical flavor to their ensembles, but for Lucumí-based practices as well.

By the time of the Mariel boatlift, *batá* and *congas* were beginning to be added to Latin music more generally. Irakere, a jazz rock fusion band, popularized the use of Afro-Cuban folklore instruments with their Grammy-winning album *Irakere* in 1980. Though this fusion of electric instruments and Latin percussion instruments had been popularized beforehand, many bands began to explore the fusion of instruments and musical genres following Irakere. It is equally as likely that Los Sublimes at Fort Chaffee performed fusion rock that included *batá* and *congas* based on new music they heard via the radio station KNJB. Refugees had open access to facilities where they could perform and access instruments without much interference. As Cuban Haitian Task Force officials began to organize activities for the base, they too needed to imply freedom of movement and freedom of activities to prevent further disturbances by Cuban protestors. Likely

¹⁷⁹ Lizarraga, Carlos “Grupo Musical ‘Los Sublimes’” *La Vida Nueva*, March 23rd, 1981. Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2 Pg. 1.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 2.

these performance rooms could have also become temples or places of worship for Cubans practicing Lucumí or Santería.

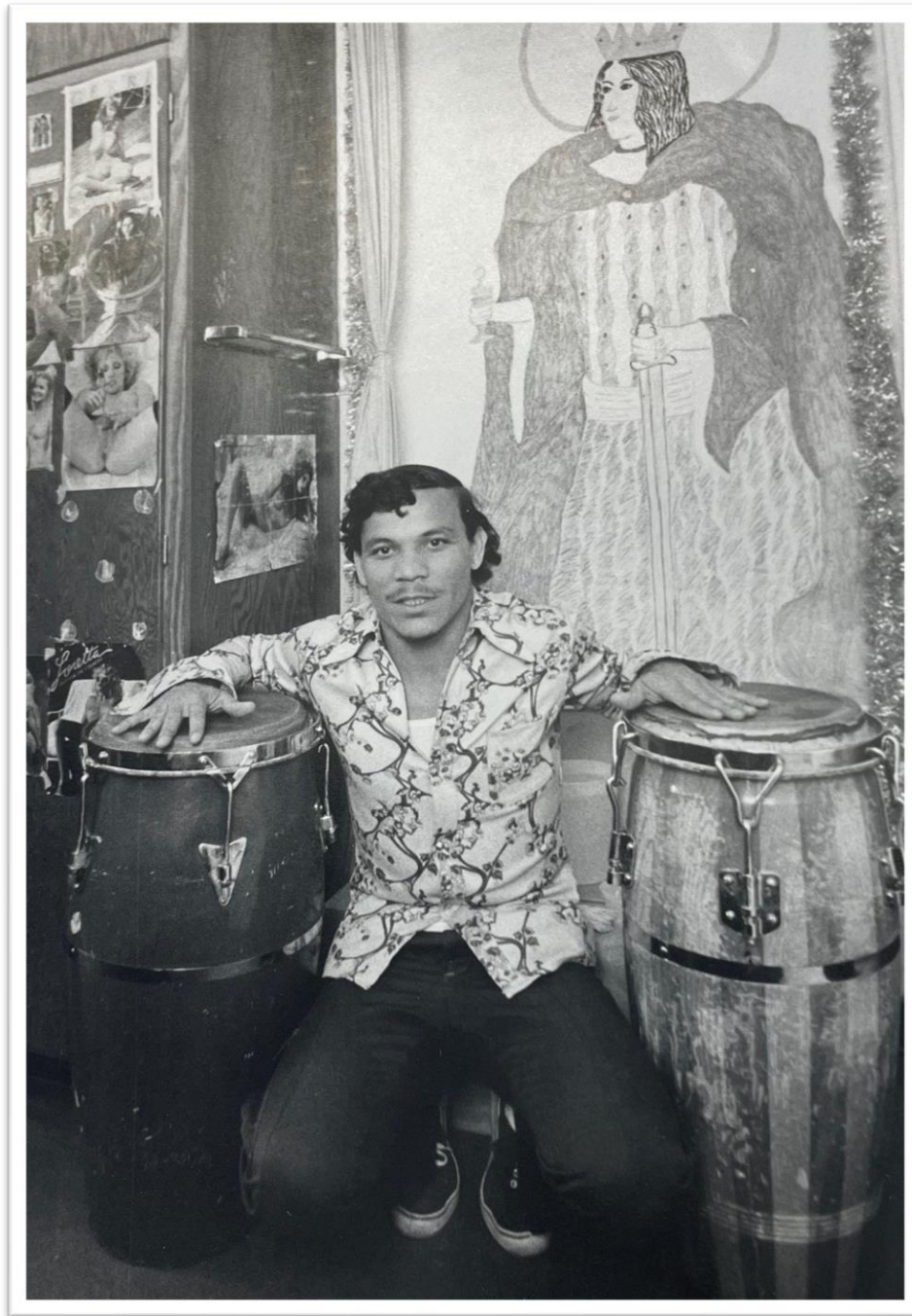


Figure 11 “Photo album” from the Cuban Heritage Collection. A refugee stands with a pair of mismatching *congas*. Behind him there is a portrait of Saint Barbara holding a Chalice and sword, representing fire, passion, and sexuality. The tinsel shows that it may be near the birthday and celebration of this Santo (December 4th).

Figure 11 further supports the theory of discrete Lucumí practices.¹⁸¹ The undated photo shows a refugee kneeling for the camera, posed with two *congas*, adequate for *bembe* practices. Behind him is a portrait of Saint Barbara holding a sword and goblet, while a halo encompasses her smiling face. Saint Barbara is a traditionally worshiped saint in Santería practices. She represents the Orisha, Shango¹⁸² the god/goddess of thunder, fire symbolizing sexuality, masculinity and passion.¹⁸³ The December 4th holiday celebrates the lives of Saint Barbara and Shango, worshiping the Orisha on its birthday.¹⁸⁴ The tinsel surrounding Saint Barbara is a common form of Christmas decoration, which would align with the date of the December celebration. This particular interpretation shows Saint Barbara holding a chalice, representing the life of Christ and the long sword, offering protection to soldiers historically, and protection of civil rights in the modern context.¹⁸⁵ Behind him, are more cut-out magazine photographs. However, these are all pornographic in nature, covering some sort of closet or other storage system. While these might be an expression of identity, these could also be religious objects in and of themselves. Shango is known as the patron/patroness of sex, masculinity, and passion. The pornographic images surrounding the Orisha could in fact be offerings for

¹⁸¹ “Photo Album” University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. MC 5175, Box 2.

¹⁸² Also known as Chango.

¹⁸³ Fernández Olmos, Margarite., and Lizabeth. Paravisini-Gebert. *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*. New York: New York University Press, 2003. Pg. 34. *Also see:* Murrell, Nathaniel Samuel. *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to Their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009. Pg. 109.

¹⁸⁴ Murrell, Nathaniel Samuel. *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to Their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009. Pg. 109.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* Pg. 109.

the December 4th holiday.¹⁸⁶ Without available access to ceremonial objects, or food to provide to Santos, magazines may have been one the few possessions that refugees could offer. Due to Cuban incarceration at Fort Chaffee and limited availability of typical ceremony objects, Lucumí allows for some modification in order to continue worship.¹⁸⁷ Through these worship ceremonies, Cuban exiles continued their religious identity, even when pressured to convert to more traditional American religions. Similar to decorative freedoms, and open expressions of nontraditional sexual identity, Lucumí and Santería practices perhaps also served as retaliation against past discrimination and a celebration of a new American ‘Cuba.’

Even as musical performers, Cuban refugees created new identities for themselves at Fort Chaffee. Besides Los Sublimes, a Cuban Haitian Task Force report suggested that hundreds of musical groups formed on the base, even if only for several performances.¹⁸⁸ While some of these may have been for religious rituals masked as musical performances, others were true musical ensembles. In fact, numerous genres were represented across the base including rock, jazz, classical, traditional Cuban, and comparsa drum circles. A December 2nd, 1980, edition of *La Vida Nueva* praised the amount of music on the base with its title, “Decir Cuba, Es Decir Música.”¹⁸⁹ The author, Carlos Lizarraga, a Cuban refugee and prominent reporter for *La Vida Nueva*, described

¹⁸⁶ Murrell, Nathaniel Samuel. *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to Their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009. Pg. 109.

¹⁸⁷ Schweitzer, Kenneth George. *The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming: Aesthetics, Transmission, Bonding, and Creativity*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. Pg. 22.

¹⁸⁸ Lizarraga, Carlos “Decir Cuba, Es Decir Musica” *La Vida Nueva*, December 2nd, 1980. Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996*. 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 1.

¹⁸⁹ Translates to “To say Cuba, is to say Music.”

his excitement at hearing music at Fort Chaffe. “This music has come to Fort Chaffee in the souls of the Cubans, and their melodies and rhythm penetrate the camp at all hours with an aroma of the homeland which lightens the anguish of being in exile.”¹⁹⁰ For Lizarraga, the fact that music continued to have a prominent place created a sense of community and a sense of being at home in an unfamiliar place. Further on in the article, Lizarraga suggested that no matter their Cuban background, their race or ethnicity did not matter because hearing music in America, “moves them a little closer to the far-away homeland.”¹⁹¹ The instrumentation and melodies created a new space within Fort Chaffee, and with it a community through their shared experiences in exile. The addition of *congas*, *batá*, and other Latin American percussive instruments mixed with electric guitars shows a hybrid of musical styles, something that was genre bending during this period. While music served a nostalgic purpose, the reinterpretation of musical styles also represented a hopeful future for a creation of a new Cuban identity.

While the Cuban Haitian Task Force and government officials censored some activities from their records, Cuban music was celebrated and served as a way to connect to the larger Arkansas community. *La Vida Nueva* prominently featured profiles of many musical artists, many written by Carlos Lizarraga. A March 20th, 1981, edition featured several front and back pages covering “Mario Espinosa: Músico y Rumbero.”¹⁹² Lizarraga described him as a “grandpa” of Fort Chaffee, noting a “Marti-like look and his

¹⁹⁰ Lizarraga, Carlos “Decir Cuba, Es Decir Musica” *La Vida Nueva*, December 2nd, 1980. Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 1.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.* Pg. 1.

¹⁹² Lizarraga, Carlos “Mario Espinosa: Musicio y Rumbero” *La Vida Nueva*, March 30th, 1981. Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.* 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 1.

firm gaze.”¹⁹³ According to the reporter, Espinosa played at several famous clubs in old Havana including Cadena Azul and Kural. Espinosa was also friends with Damaso Perez, the inventor of the Mambo. Lizarraga devoted three pages to drawing the reader’s attention to the importance of Mario Espinosa and his incredible life. Pictures showed Espinosa on the base, dancing to the Rumba and playing Congas.¹⁹⁴ Through his writing, Carlos Lizarraga made a point to highlight not only what reminded him of Cuba, but cultural expressions of Cuban refugees. His stories covered painters, art collectors, poetry writers, horseshoe players, and even a magician. Through these stories *La Vida Nueva* celebrated aspects of Cuban culture that continued on in America, but also new beginnings and a community formed through their common exiled experience. Even Carlos Lizarraga’s newspaper article writing, in and of itself, is a continuance of Cuban culture through his celebration of all things cultural. The flourished style of writing, even within the side-by-side English translations, demonstrated the writer’s love and passion for Cuba. Unlike traditional journalism, his works represent a Cuba lost and his personal passions, at times reading like poetry rather than journalism.

On June 12th, 1981, Carlos Lizarraga was sponsored and given the opportunity to leave Fort Chaffee. As a final goodbye, he wrote his last *La Vida Nueva* article expressing his sadness about leaving both Cuba and his newfound Cuban refugee community in Fort Chaffee. The article was titled, “Una Despedida Sin Adios”—a

¹⁹³ Lizarraga, Carlos “Mario Espinosa: Musicio y Rumbero” *La Vida Nueva*, March 30th, 1981. Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996*. 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 2.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.* Pgs. 1-2.

farewell without a goodbye.¹⁹⁵ Lizarraga described his journey in exile from Cuba to America: palm trees swaying, and tears in his eyes as he saw the last bits of Cuba as he boarded a small fishing vessel bound for the Florida Keys. He apologized to Fort Chaffee for “an eruption of uncontrollable violence” regarding the June 1st protests leaving Americans and Cubans wounded emotionally and physically.¹⁹⁶ As he concluded his thoughtful farewell address, Lizarraga noted not the fear for the Cubans left behind at Chaffee, but rather hope for his community and their life in America. “It’s up to all the Cubans and Americans to return a true image of their relationships back into what they were up till now: relationships of brothers and sisters. It is up to the Cubans to reassure that calling ourselves Cubans is really an honor.”¹⁹⁷ Lizarraga mourned the community he lost by gaining sponsorship. While many Cubans jumped at the possibility, his extended stay made him realize the joys of building a community outside of Cuba. For Lizarraga, he felt connected to Americans like he did other Cubans, a sense of familial community which he hoped would continue on into the future.

Carlos Lizarraga imagined a future of possibilities and peace between Americans and Cubans. While his vision did not fully come true, through this complex network of opinions and ideas, Cubans and Americans did find some middle ground. Though some freedoms were limited or censored, many Cubans gained the ability to express themselves freely while at Fort Chaffee. Refugees experienced freedom of sexuality, religion (even if in private), and freedom of expression through not only music, but a

¹⁹⁵ Lizarraga, Carlos “Una Despedida Sin Adios” *La Vida Nueva*, June 12th, 1981. Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 1.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. Pg. 2.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. Pg. 2.

wide range of hobbies that may have been previously unavailable to them. Their celebration was not only of Cuban culture, but a new Cuban American identity. These new perspectives mixed old traditions of Cuban life, with new, progressive ideas that were open and free within the protective confines of Fort Chaffee. Though these openly expressed identities likely did not last long within their sponsorship networks, the *Marielitos* of Fort Chaffee built for themselves within military imprisonment new freedoms. However, the outside Arkansas community did not support these new identities and continually fought for Cubans to conform to their definitions of what it means to be an American.

Chapter 3: Community Perspectives

Following the June 1st, 1980 incident, thousands of letters and signatures poured into the office of the Governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton. Arkansans and other concerned citizens wrote complaints about the Cuban refugees who had been interned at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. Elizabeth Hagen, a Fort Smith resident, wrote, “I will not go home near Fort Chaffee until those illegal Cubans are deported!”¹⁹⁸ Her return address from Seattle, Washington suggested that she did in fact move away from Fort Chaffee due to a fear of Cuban exiles. Another resident of Arkansas, a ten-year-old girl named Jana Huff, wrote another suggestion. “When President Carter ran in the Arkansas primaries he said, ‘The people of Arkansas are so kind-hearted.’ If we’re so generous and caring, why don’t we dump them [the Cubans] onto the White House grounds, because we’re so sick of this

¹⁹⁸ Hagen, Elizabeth. “Letter to Gov. Clinton.” June 8th, 1980. Central Arkansas Library System Roberts Library Collection. Little Rock, AR. Governor Clinton Collection, Box 1, Folder 20. Fort Smith borders Fort Chaffee.

stuff.”¹⁹⁹ Owner of the aptly named “Nut House,” pecan dealer Billy Ellis had an even more unique idea. He felt it would be best to keep the Cubans detained as sharecroppers working, “From sunup to sunset!” In fact, Billy wanted to strike a deal with John Deere farm equipment, too. “Pictures can be taken, articles written, films produced and shown and read nationwide. Worldwide to tell the truth!”²⁰⁰ Many of his sentences in the remainder of the letter were filled with similar enthusiastic exclamations about the profitability of his self-proclaimed genius idea. Though the ideas in these letters ranged from hate to anger to capitalist schemes, they all shared ideas of removing or at least containing a new group that had been recently introduced into their communities: the Cubans.

Local news outlets continued to focus on refugees on the military base throughout the coming months, mainly on Fort Chaffee’s security measures. *The Crossroads* was a locally published and civilian-run newspaper that focused on the happenings on Fort Chaffee, targeting an audience of military families, military personnel, and those who wanted to be informed of non-classified military events.²⁰¹ In a June 12th, 1980 issue, just eleven days after what was by then being described as the “disturbance,” an article titled “What’s cooking?” showed an off-duty soldier making a surprisingly large number of sandwiches.²⁰² While seemingly mundane, the article showed tensions between the

¹⁹⁹ Huff, Jana. “Letter to Gov. Clinton.” June 2nd, 1980. Central Arkansas Library System; Roberts Library Collection. Little Rock, AR. Governor Clinton Collection, Box 1, Folder 18.

²⁰⁰ Ellis, Billy. “Letter to Gov. Clinton.” June 5th, 1980. Central Arkansas Library System; Roberts Library. Little Rock, AR. Governor Clinton Collection, Box 1, Folder 19.

²⁰¹ *The Crossroads* University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1.

²⁰² Unknown author, “What’s Cooking?” *The Crossroads*, Ft. Smith, Arkansas, June 12th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1.

refugees and the local community. “Three units combined to keep up the strength and morale of their troops during the Cuban violence last week by providing a 24-hour mess.”²⁰³ By describing the June 1 event as “Cuban violence,” as opposed to a protest of their military internment, *The Crossroads* generalized this group of refugees as violent. These implicit descriptions furthered the identity of Cuban refugees as potential violent criminals and different than the surrounding community.

Fears of these violent refugees staging another escape from Fort Chaffee continued to ripple through the community. Some responded with direct hate. For weeks following the original protest, Ku Klux Klan members picketed outside the walls of Fort Chaffee. While only around a few dozen Klan members were responsible for direct racism, the community at large feared these refugees to be violent. *The Crossroads* published an article on the 3rd of July 1980 titled “Nuts to Chaffee.” The article described Mary Jane Mustard, the Principal Authorizing Official’s secretary on base, giving a tour of the refugee camp to several Planters Peanuts employees.²⁰⁴ The Planters Peanuts factory in Fort Smith, Arkansas was remarkably close to Fort Chaffee, quite literally next door. In return for the camp’s hospitality, Planters presented a case of 12 jars of peanuts to Mary Jane Mustard.²⁰⁵ These nuts were not given to the refugees but rather distributed to the active duty guards patrolling the perimeter around Fort Chaffee that day.²⁰⁶ The largely symbolic demonstration showed that Planters Peanuts was largely

²⁰³ Unknown author, “What’s Cooking?” *The Crossroads*, Ft. Smith, Arkansas, June 12th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Unknown author, “Nuts to Chaffee” *The Crossroads*, Ft. Smith, Arkansas, July 3rd, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1.

worried about their own security, fearing these refugees, and praising the guards for keeping the refugees within the barbed wire fences of the refugee camp. An interview from August 9th, 1980 for the *New York Times* confirmed that many business owners and citizens continued to fear Cuban refugees. A general store owner told reporters, “I was afraid when the riots broke out...I don’t think it's right, us taking care of these Cubans. We don’t take good enough care of Americans.”²⁰⁷ The community not only feared that the Cubans would continue to protest and become violent towards the community, but many felt no responsibility to take care of the Cuban refugees. Nor did the people of Arkansas want Cubans at Fort Chaffee.

In Barling, Arkansas, almost all local shops began to increase their stock of guns, bullets and ammunition. In 1980, Arkansas was a no permit state, meaning there were no restrictions on purchasing firearms, no background check, or receipt needed, just a valid ID to confirm age and the money to purchase. A *New York Times* article on August 9th, 1980, followed up on the Fort Chaffee situation. The article describes the “gate house,” a popular, stone, historic structure that was a common tourist destination located outside of Fort Chaffee. According to reporter Karen DeWitt, the gate house was selling T-shirts commemorating the June 1st protest. One shirt read “I survived the Cuban rock festival” mocking the Cuban retaliation against police officers. Another, more disturbing shirt “depict[ed] a crowd of Cubans at the gate house as seen through a gun sight.”²⁰⁸ The fact that these aggressively violent shirts were being sold months after the incident shows that

²⁰⁷ DeWitt, Karen. "New Cuban Influx at Fort Chaffee Arouses Hostility: Concern for Security Sought Reversal of Decision Bearing of Arms Encouraged Weapons Search at Base." *New York Times*, Aug 11, 1980.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

the local community never really forgot about the protest and continued to fear Cuban refugees. The gun sight painted a darker image, implying that next time the community would become directly violent towards escapees.

While residents of Arkansas feared the immigrants would display further violent behavior, homosexuality presented another kind of undesirable behavior. In A 1980 interview, on the popular Fayetteville, Arkansas, radio show *Contact*, Catalina “Alina” Fernandez spoke about Cuban refugees and community concerns. “In 20,000 people you will find prostitutes, you would find criminals, and you would find homosexuals... having all these people together in this group creates all this unrest.”²⁰⁹ With the classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association in 1952, many people across the United States, especially conservatives, feared LGBTQ people. These political tensions made national headlines on June 28th, 1969, with the Stonewall Riots in New York City. As police became violent, and began arresting patrons of lesbian and gay bars in the area of the Stonewall Inn, the crowds too protested against police brutality. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, with openly queer musicians and actors speaking publicly about homosexuality, gayness had a spotlight in American life. Author and historian Michael Bronski argues that by the early 1970s, “For conservatives, the issue was no longer simply about homosexuals. If homosexuality was a disease, as the psychoanalysts argued, it was infecting the entire body politic.”²¹⁰ Many conservatives across the U.S. worried that homosexuality would infect the values, culture, and traditions their politics swore to uphold. Many worried about straight men

²⁰⁹ Fernandez, Alina. “Interview on radio show *Contact*” June 1980. Alina Fernandez Papers, University of Arkansas, Little Rock. MC 870 Cassette Tape 1, Side B.

²¹⁰ Bronski, Michael. *A Queer History of the United States*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2011. Pg. 238.

dressing in homosexual ways, a liberation of fashion. By 1980, it was typical for many Arkansans on that side of the political spectrum to demonize homosexual activities as not only immoral, but dangerous to the foundation of the United States.

Alina Fernandez herself was a Cuban immigrant who had followed her family to Arkansas in 1963 with her husband, a university professor in Havana. Through her own recounting on the radio program, Fernandez explains how her husband was jailed in Cuba for his “political opinions” following the Cuban Revolution and remained there for several years after.²¹¹ Alina and her husband both found jobs at the University of Arkansas; he taught political science, and she worked in the university library.²¹² Alina went to Fort Chaffee, by her accounts, around three times a week to teach English and visit with the Cuban refugees. She and her husband, on a volunteer basis, organized the first of these English classes.

The Arkansas community was not only afraid of different cultures and sexualities, but also feared that Fidel Castro had sent subversive communists to undermine the boatlift and refugee resettlement. The host of *Contact* informed Alina Fernandez that many people were afraid after the June 1st incident. Alina replied, “This is our opinion... that Castro has sent some people to come here and make some kind of disturbance. In communism, a minority is enough to cause a problem.”²¹³ Fernandez provided authority on the topic based on her status as a first-generation Cuban immigrant and a longtime Arkansas community member. On the cassette recording, Alina Fernandez has a Southern

²¹¹ Fernandez, Alina. “Interview on radio show *Contact*” June 1980. Alina Fernandez Papers, University of Arkansas, Little Rock. MC 870 Cassette Tape 1, Side B.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

accent, providing another level of authority and belonging within the community. Her denunciation of Fidel Castro and communism proved to her neighbors that she herself was not an agent of subversion. With this established ethos, Fernandez put out a call to action to her community to help the Cuban refugees.

Alina Fernandez told listeners that most of these refugees were good, America-loving people. By shifting the blame for the events of June 1st onto a few “terrorists,”²¹⁴ Fernandez eliminated some racist generalizations. Her argument began to morph into a call to action to assist the good refugees in their anti-communist struggles. Fernandez began to paint the refugees as religious and as supporters of capitalism, and the United States. Her message was clear: the community surrounding Fort Chaffee should denounce unwelcome behaviors and help those who submitted to traditional American values. Throughout the interview, she called for more volunteer action and assistance for Cuban refugees, promoting the idea of saving these immigrants from themselves.

Historians, sociologists, and political scientists have recognized patterns of what are currently termed “White savior complexes” across much of American history. Ethno-religious anthropologist Ranjan Bandyopadhyay argues that “white Christian volunteer tourists take advantage of their race, which they consider far more superior to the inferior people in the Global South who are the white man’s and woman’s burden.”²¹⁵ According to Bandyopadhyay, white volunteers see themselves as superior to the groups they are

²¹⁴ Fernandez, Alina. “Interview on radio show *Contact*” June 1980. Alina Fernandez Papers, University of Arkansas, Little Rock. MC 870 Cassette Tape 1, Side B.

²¹⁵ Bandyopadhyay, Ranjan. “Volunteer Tourism and ‘The White Man’s Burden’: Globalization of Suffering, White Savior Complex, Religion and Modernity.” *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 27, no. 3 2019. Pg. 340.

helping in cultural, economic, and racial terms.²¹⁶ Although Bandyopadhyay refers to missionary groups and other white tourist volunteers in other countries, I argue that this same pattern applies to refugees of the Mariel boatlift at Fort Chaffee. While not in another country, the Cuban refugees existed within the walls of Fort Chaffee, separated from white American society by imprisonment. The surrounding community arrived as tourists, attempting to assist the refugees through their own implied burden. Many of these refugees were fleeing persecution toward a country whose perceived values they personally embraced and the capitalist ideals of becoming an American. While this may seem contradictory to the historic discrimination within the greater Arkansas area, *Marielitos* engaged directly with conservative ideals, such as anti-communism, placing them in a new political area. Arkansans within the Fort Smith and Barling communities felt a savior complex towards the Cuban refugees for multiple reasons.

The first reason that some members of the local community wanted to save the Cuban refugees was because they believed that the *Marielitos* shared their anti-communist and anti-Castro political beliefs. Whereas many people continued to fear the primarily Black population of Fort Chaffee, queer refugees, and supposed Castro-enlisted terrorists, other members of the local community began to showcase Cuban refugees as friends. In a July 10th, 1980, edition of *The Crossroads*, a full front-page photo was accompanied with a bold headline reading “FIRST FOURTH: With some help from their

²¹⁶ Bandyopadhyay, Ranjan. “Volunteer Tourism and ‘The White Man’s Burden’: Globalization of Suffering, White Savior Complex, Religion and Modernity.” *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 27, no. 3 2019. Pg. 340.

friends, Cubans celebrate the ‘hottest’ holiday of the year.’²¹⁷ The newspaper headline was accompanied by a photo of about a dozen refugee children packed into a plastic swimming pool, waving American flags. An image of children would automatically evoke a sympathetic response from *Crossroads* readers. Additionally, the article described itself and the surrounding community as friends to Cubans. The next two pages immediately inside the paper were filled with more photos of a self-described “Unforgettable Fourth.” One image showed a Cuban waving an American flag, as several Howitzer artillery pieces fired in the background. Refugee children posed with a clown from the local community, and a boxing ring drew a large audience as two Cuban émigrés fought.²¹⁸ These images were also accompanied by more formal photographs of the National Guard presenting arms, and a stationary Howitzer cannon on display.²¹⁹ Interestingly, a soccer match was arranged between Vietnamese and Mariel boatlift refugees. This interaction shows that on some level the community compared the two refugee groups to one another, even though their cultures and experiences were vastly different.

Arkansas, like many other U.S. states, greatly emphasized holidays as a representation of American values and traditions that should be praised and strictly followed. For the community, this event was a way to promote American values and demonstrate the ideals of freedom in direct opposition to communism. Diana Olson, the author of the article, wrote in the conclusion how Garzon Milagro Dinza’s a Cuban child

²¹⁷ Olson, Diana. “First Fourth: With Some Help from Their Friends” *The Crossroads*, Ft. Smith, Arkansas July 10th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1. Pg. 1.

²¹⁸ Ibid. Pg. 2.

²¹⁹ Ibid. Pg. 2.

whose birthday happened to fall on July 4th. The author wrote, “Her face reflected the joy of being here. Not to mention that hers and America’s birthday share the same special day. She is one who could truly understand the meaning of Independence Day.”²²⁰ This closing image reflected how Arkansans were giving Mariel refugees liberty embodying the same values of the original American colonies. Furthermore, this celebration was representative of freeing refugees from Fidel Castro and Cuba. Articles and news stories such as these began to bridge the gap between the Cuban refugees being “others” and the creation of their new American identities. The Arkansas community thought of themselves as being directly engaged in fighting communism on the homefront by saving these refugees from communism.

²²⁰ Olson, Diana. “First Fourth: With Some Help from Their Friends” *The Crossroads*, Ft. Smith, Arkansas July 10th, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1. Pg. 2.



Figure 12 “*La Vida Nueva* December 13th, 1980” from the Cuban Heritage Collection. A high school student wearing an Uncle Sam costume instructs a room full of Cuban refugees. On the desks of the classroom are Bingo cards, teaching the students about free trade and enterprise.

Following the start of English classes in Fort Chaffee in late June and early July of 1980, several other community-led classes began to be offered on the base through a volunteer basis. The first was an American culture class. These were once-a-day, several-hour-long courses, lasting a total of several months.²²¹ Over the course of these classes, refugees took quizzes and tests resulting in passing or failing grades. Refugees received certificates signed by local community representatives for each course they passed.²²² The refugee-published newspaper on Fort Chaffee, *La Vida Nueva*, discussed these American culture classes.²²³ An article published on December 13th, 1980, titled “Explican Estudiantes Norteamericanos el Sistema de Comercio Libre”²²⁴ described how local high school students visited a refugee culture class. The image (Figure 12) accompanying the front-page story showed refugees in small school desks in a makeshift classroom.²²⁵ Thick wire mesh barred the windows, juxtaposed with posters instructing the refugees on American fashion and the English language. Off to the left of the image, a chart translated colors from Spanish to English. In the foreground, a high school student from Fort Smith wearing an “Uncle Sam” style stars and stripes top hat shook the hand of an émigré.²²⁶ The students from the local high school instructed the Cuban refugees through a game of Bingo, teaching them the Free Trade System and principles of

²²¹ Lizarraga, Carlos “Explican Estudiantes Norteamericanos el Sistema de Comercio libre” *La Vida Nueva* Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 1.

²²² Ibid. Pg. 1.

²²³ Ibid. Pg. 1.

²²⁴ Roughly translates to “North American Students Explain the Free Trade System.”

²²⁵ Lizarraga, Carlos “Explican Estudiantes Norteamericanos el Sistema de Comercio libre” *La Vida Nueva* Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 1.

²²⁶ Ibid. Pg. 1.

capitalism. Another photo showed the same high school student in a front corner of the classroom. He instructs refugees at the front of the classroom behind a wall covered in hand drawn butcher paper illustrations. One such illustration showed a smiling characterization of the United States (Figure 13), wearing another “Uncle Sam” top hat. Bold letters on the poster read “FREE ENTERPRISE” and “It’s Working!!”²²⁷



Figure 13 “*La Vida Nueva* December 13th, 1980” from the Cuban Heritage Collection. This image shows another Fort Smith high school student instructing Cuban refugees. Notice the butcher paper U.S.A smiling and wearing an Uncle Sam hat.

Letting high schoolers visit the refugees reaffirmed to the community that the Cubans in their midst were not communists, but rather defectors from the system who were ready to

²²⁷ Lizarraga, Carlos “Explican Estudiantes Norteamericanos el Sistema de Comercio libre” *La Vida Nueva* Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 2.

learn about America. Furthermore, the visit emphasized liberty and the freedom of a new economic system for these exiles. White highschoolers teaching a room full of fully grown, mainly Black refugees also confirmed the community's implicit white savior complex.

For the Arkansas community, a large part of being an American was an emphasis on freedom, liberty, and religion. While freedom and liberty were the main lessons of classes and holiday festivals at Fort Chaffee, the religious element was more complex. Immediately after the arrival of Cuban exiles, different denominations of Christians began to attempt to convert or indoctrinate Cubans into their specific faiths. The Cuban-Haitian Task Force overview suggested that each camp would be staffed with a religious coordinator, many of whom were Roman Catholic or Protestant.²²⁸ The report also included that, "Many groups attempted to gain access to the enclaves in an effort to proselytize the entrants, but a policy of organized religion and church services prevailed."²²⁹ Different denominations of religious groups attempted to convert these refugees, similar to volunteer tourists of third world countries.

The Cuban Haitian Task Force also noted that the religious coordinators were largely unsuccessful. Many of the Cuban entrants who participated in religious activities in the United States had previously practiced their religion in private, hidden from the Cuban government. Additionally, the report further suggested that instead of organized religion, the majority of religious practices were different versions of Santería. One of the rituals that they noted was associated with Lucumí based religious practices of leaving

²²⁸ Cuban Haitian Task Force, "Overview" Unknown Date, Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1, Pg. 15.

²²⁹ Ibid. Pg. 15.

fruit or other food as an offering. Base officials were uncomfortable with these religious offerings. Furthermore, the report described the religion as “primitive” and banned the practice due to the rotting fruit being unsanitary.²³⁰ While base officials did not ban the religion, their descriptions show a misunderstanding of Cuban culture. This further “othered” the Mariel refugees, deeming their traditions wrong and the white American viewpoints correct.

Though religious officials proved to be unpopular within Fort Chaffee, popular news outlets in the Fort Smith area emphasized their importance and honored a fictitious Cuban commitment to organized religion. An edition of *The Crossroads* published on July 3rd, 1980, titled “Refugees Baptized” illustrated the religious zeal of the community. “While many refugees were participating in the God and Country Worship Service at Barling First Baptist Church, approximately twenty Cubans were being immersed in Baptism at Fort Chaffee’s swimming pool.”²³¹ This baptism was concurrent with a Sunday mass. The priest, Reverend Selby Martin, chose to skip his typical mass at Barling’s Assembly of God Church in favor of baptizing these Cubans. Reverend Selby Martin was shown in the article in the Fort Chaffee swimming pool with several baptized refugees by his side, one of whom was a practicing priest before the Cuban Revolution.²³² To the readers of *The Crossroads* many of whom were likely Christian themselves, the baptism of these refugees showed the community that Cubans were upstanding people

²³⁰ Cuban Haitian Task Force, “Overview” Unknown Date, Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1, Pg. 15.

²³¹ Harris, Bob. “Refugees Baptized” *The Crossroads*, Ft. Smith, Arkansas July 3rd, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee Collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 12.

²³² *Ibid.* Pg. 12.

who were willing to integrate into their white Southern culture. In fact, *The Crossroads* often published a small section titled “In His corner,” a summary of religious events at Fort Chaffee, written by Captain Steven Heetland.²³³ This section highlighted important verses from the Bible, reaffirming that the readership of the paper and the local Arkansas community was deeply intertwined with the Christian God. Additionally, the involvement of two priests from separate churches, neither of which was recognized as the camp's religious official, shows that at Fort Chaffee, outside groups were indeed welcomed and given a place to preach to the Mariel refugees as long as they were Christian.

Faith-based assistance groups were a major component of government mandated refugee assistance efforts. Volunteer agencies have had direct involvement with political refugees since the end of World War II.²³⁴ Nine religious groups organized together to create a joint refugee assistance organization with the combined title of Volunteer Agencies (VOLAGS). Under one organization, these religious different religious groups pool resources together, including government funding, to help refugees. These groups were used throughout World War II to help resettle European refugees, and they remained in use throughout the remainder of the 20th century. The United States federal government supplied Volunteer Agencies with funding, in order to secure sponsorship positions within their faith networks to fast-track the immigration process for refugees. Volunteer Agencies were not new to Fort Chaffee. In fact, many helped secure

²³³ Harris, Bob. “Refugees Baptized” *The Crossroads*, Ft. Smith, Arkansas July 3rd, 1980. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee Collection, 1980-1996.*, 1980. CHC 5175 Box 2. Pg. 12.

²³⁴ Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, “Guide for Orientation Leaders” May 1980. New York, NY. Alina Fernandez Papers, University of Arkansas, Little Rock. MC 870. Box 5, Folder 5.

sponsorship for Vietnamese refugees across the United States.²³⁵ Though these were government-funded groups, they were not affiliated with the U.S. government. In theory, Volunteer Agencies were influenced by their faith to sponsor refugees but did not force any refugees into a faith-based commitment in exchange for their sponsorship.

Most Volunteer Agencies at an administrative level try to honor their commitment to strictly helping refugees without a religious context. A Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) “Orientation leader guide” described exactly how leaders from within the Lutheran Church should speak to Cuban refugees. The 78-page guide discussed the Lutherans’ official stance on almost every topic of American life, from taxes and finances to death and burial. Even polite walking mannerisms and race relations were taught.²³⁶ Largely, the guide described a method of teaching without telling and instructed the leaders to gently guide refugees through the basics of American life. Reminders within the lines of the book showcased problems with individual perspectives within the Lutheran immigration assistance community. One reminder read, “DON’T talk down to participants. They are intelligent human beings.”²³⁷ While many people would not think twice about that fact, for volunteers in Arkansas, the Lutheran Church felt they needed an additional reminder. Another suggested “WARNING: Wages may be high, but expenses are also high.”²³⁸ Again, this may seem like a general fact of life in the United States, but it is clear that many orientation leaders may not have considered the limited wages and job opportunities available to these refugees. By far the most common

²³⁵ Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, “Guide for Orientation Leaders” May 1980. New York, NY. Alina Fernandez Papers, University of Arkansas, Little Rock. MC 870. Box 5, Folder 5.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid. Pg. 3.

²³⁸ Ibid. Pg. 3.

reminder within this orientation packet was to not preach religion. Several reminders focused on the fact that the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service was a non-government entity that assisted the government, based on its own religious faith. However, the members were not supposed to preach religion to the refugees or force them into conversion. One such reminder stressed, “Refugees do NOT have to feel obligated to join the church, but the congregation or individuals in the congregation may invite refugees to attend social gatherings at the church or other church-related activities.”²³⁹ These reminders surfaced numerous times throughout the orientation packet, especially every time religion was discussed. While some Cuban exiles were almost immediately processed and allowed to go into the care of friends or family already with U.S. citizenship, a large portion of these refugees had to go through a government certified Volunteer Agency sponsorship process in order to gain immigration paperwork. Members within these religious groups' congregations would take in the refugees and help them find housing, food, and, ideally, employment.

While the Lutheran booklet was largely devoid of religious conversion, the pamphlets sent to potential sponsors within congregations further demonstrated white savior complexes within the religious organizations of the Volunteer Agency groups. At Fort Chaffee, a program was established under the name “Refugiados Cubanos: Last Step to Freedom.”²⁴⁰ The program was designed to showcase the opportunities associated with sponsoring a Cuban refugee. Numerous copies of this booklet were printed by the Cuban-

²³⁹ Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, “Guide for Orientation Leaders” May 1980. New York, NY. Alina Fernandez Papers, University of Arkansas, Little Rock. MC 870. Box 5, Folder 5. Pg. 9.

²⁴⁰ Cuban Haitian Task Force. “Refugiados Cubanos: Last Step to Freedom” 1980-1981, Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. Alina Fernandez Papers, University of Arkansas, Little Rock. MC 870 Box 1, Folder 4.

Haitian Task Force and distributed to Volunteer Agency groups involved with the resettlement of refugees. Pamphlets were then mailed or distributed to potential Volunteer Agency sponsors within each congregation. The short five-page booklet was filled with large photos of refugees with quotes from each refugee underneath the photo. One quote read, “Why doesn’t someone sponsor me? Look at my hands. I am a hard worker. If I don’t get work soon, I will lose my calluses.”²⁴¹ Another quote detailed a refugee's political opposition to Castro, justifying why he had been jailed in a Cuban prison. The Last Step to Freedom pamphlets portrayed the refugees as poor and unfortunate, recounting their reasons for leaving Cuba. The final page of the pamphlet read “They will need friendship, guidance, and an opportunity to become self-sufficient. You can help by becoming a sponsor.”²⁴² The Cuban Haitian Task Force invoked ideals of saving the refugees to secure their sponsorship within Volunteer Agency networks. As seen by the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service packet, the exiles were intelligent and mainly needed guidance on American systems that differed from their home country. Many of the reminders throughout the orientation packet were aimed at combating prejudice towards the Cuban refugees. However, the Last Step to Freedom pamphlet describes these refugees as needing someone “willing to help” invoking the ideals of saving refugees. The Cuban Haitian Task Force Pamphlet played into existing white savior complexes of the Volunteer Agency sponsors in order to resettle the refugees as soon as possible.

²⁴¹ Cuban Haitian Task Force. “Refugiados Cubanos: Last Step to Freedom” 1980-1981, Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. Alina Fernandez Papers, University of Arkansas, Little Rock. MC 870 Box 1, Folder 4. Pg 4.

²⁴² Ibid. Pg. 5.

Even with pamphlets, immense government funding to Volunteer Agencies, and Cuban-Haitian Task Force involvement, only around 30-40% of all Mariel refugees who were given sponsorship opportunities successfully completed the program. Host families returned refugees to Fort Chaffee, voiding their sponsorship obligations due to the refugees being “problematic.”²⁴³ It appeared that many hosts felt that the refugees did not align with their personal worldview or definition of proper behaviors. By doing this, Cuban refugees would have to start over at Fort Chaffee, hopefully gaining another sponsorship opportunity. Paula Dominique, the spokeswoman for the Church World Service (CWS), another organization in the Volunteer Agency partnership, spoke on the issue in a December 1980 *New York Times* expose on Fort Chaffee and the Mariel boatlift. “There are people who call up and request a white, college-educated Cuban who speaks English... We remind them that we are not a Sears catalog.”²⁴⁴ Many of the sponsors wanted someone that conformed to their stereotypes of “good” Cubans. Based on government policy, the Cuban Haitian Task Force and the Volunteer Agencies were unable to give much more than a name to potential sponsors. Three different categories existed for refugees within the Volunteer Agency network: green, meaning no special accommodations, yellow, likely meaning an illness or some other limiting factor, and red, which meant the individual acted in a violent or criminal way at the camp.²⁴⁵ Only around 600 refugees, or 10% of Fort Chaffee’s population, fell into the red category, with the majority in the green area.²⁴⁶ However, many sponsors demanded details about the life

²⁴³ Eckstein, Susan. *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pg. 98.

²⁴⁴ Paul, Heath Hoeffel. "Fort Chaffee's Unwanted Cubans." *New York Times*, Dec 21, 1980. Pg. 1.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. Pg. 3.

²⁴⁶ Ibid. Pg. 3.

and conditions of the individuals they sponsored. Besides their name and accommodation color, these organizations refused to give out other details. While some sponsors accepted this, many others became angry with Volunteer Agency representatives and demanded to choose the exact person they would sponsor.

Some people saw sponsorship as an opportunity to exploit refugees. The same *New York Times* article detailed the story of Mayté Espinosa Garcia and Eribito Espinosa Carranzana, a married couple who were sponsored in September of 1980. The couple was sent to a farm in Savannah, Georgia, where they were expected to provide labor at a greatly reduced pay rate to an unnamed farmer. When the interracial couple arrived, the farmer made it clear he did not like black people by spitting every time he saw Mayté, and only addressed Eribito.²⁴⁷ When the farmer found out Mayté was pregnant, he forced her into his truck and dropped her off at the nearest airport with a ticket back to Fort Chaffee for her to give birth at an onsite medical clinic, instead of paying for it out of pocket. Mayté was taken without Eribito's knowledge. Then, as days and weeks passed, Eribito continued to question his sponsor as to the health of his baby and wife. The farmer responded that, "the baby had been eaten all up by syphilis."²⁴⁸ Several days later, Eribito received a letter informing him that everything went as expected and there were no complications. Finally, after poor treatment, long hours, and terrible wages, Eribito announced that he wanted to return to Fort Chaffee. The farmer declined his request and promised Eribito a bonus at Christmas time. When the Cuban insisted, the farmer reportedly tied him up in his barn and beat him into submission. Eribito secretly informed

²⁴⁷ Paul, Heath Hoeffel. "Fort Chaffee's Unwanted Cubans." *New York Times*, Dec 21, 1980. Pg. 4.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.* Pg. 4.

a police officer at the Savannah police department, who helped him return to Fort Chaffee and reunite with his wife.

Refugees were hastily placed across the southern United States leading to sponsorship matches that were not entirely successful. Fernando Rangel, the head of the Volunteer Agencies returnee program, was extremely worried about how mounting pressures from federal agencies to resettle refugees as quickly as possible, coupled with falling sponsorship numbers, would affect the refugees. "The volunteer agencies are taking bigger chances with the sponsors who approach them... You know a lot of these people are going to end up in migrant labor camps or other exploitative situations that none of us would tolerate."²⁴⁹ While some sponsors felt they were genuinely helping refugees, even though the lens of a white savior complex, Rangel suggests that with lowering Volunteer Agency standards, more refugees would end up in situations that they might not know were exploitative. The Cuban Haitian Task Force, created the returnee program, a separate division of the task force, specifically to combat these increasing resettlement risks. In context, these lessened standards for refugee resettlement makes sense through understanding the motivations of the Volunteer Agencies directly involved with Cuban resettlement. For every resettled Cuban, the responsible Volunteer Agency would receive \$300 directly to the organization.²⁵⁰ As the camps numbers began to dwindle, it was in the best financial interest of the Volunteer Agencies to resettle as many of the remaining Cubans as possible, before the federal government closed the refugee camps entirely, or the Cuban Haitian Task Force assumed control of the sponsorship

²⁴⁹ Paul, Heath Hoeffel. "Fort Chaffee's Unwanted Cubans." *New York Times*, Dec 21, 1980. Pg. 3.

²⁵⁰ Lipman, Jana K. "The Fish Trusts the Water, and It Is in the Water That It Is Cooked." *Radical History Review* 2013, no. 115. 2013. Pg. 124.

process. The Cuban Haitian Task Force after action report suggests that out of a total of 4,112 Volunteer Agency sponsored Cubans at Fort Chaffee, 197 returned to camp.²⁵¹

However, some sponsorship opportunities provided hope rather than fear. By August of 1980, several nationally based gay rights groups created their own coalition to sponsor openly queer refugees. The National Gay Rights Task Force (NGRTF) and the Metropolitan Community Church reached out to their networks and partnered with the Cuban Haitian Task Force to find homes for queer refugees. Charles Brydon of the National Gay Rights Task Force reported, “While the general American public has been hesitant about the Cuban refugees, the Gay community has been very supportive.”²⁵² By the publication of the August 17th, 1980, *New York Times* article, over 250 Cubans had been sponsored by individuals within gay community networks. While there was a much larger estimated queer population at Fort Chaffee, many hid their sexuality due to persecution. However, this network was smaller than the official Volunteer Agency church organizations that tended to have conservative sponsors, especially in the southern United States. Sylvia González, an unidentified member of the Cuban Haitian Task Force sponsorship team, explained queer life at Fort Chaffee. “We have to impress upon them that homosexuality is not an accepted thing by Americans at large...So, once they’ve been assigned a sponsor, you’ll see that their eyebrows tend to grow out and the makeup fades as they prepare for reality.”²⁵³ The refugees physically had to change themselves, and in turn, their identities to be accepted within U.S. society, and gain the sponsorship

²⁵¹ Cuban Haitian Task Force, “Overview” Unknown Date, Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas. University of Miami Library. Cuban Heritage Collection. *Fort Chaffee collection, 1980-1996*. 1980. CHC 5175 Box 1.

²⁵² DeWitt, Karen. “Homosexual Cubans Get Settlement Aid: Two U.S. Organizations Assist in Seeking Sponsors.” *New York Times*, Aug 17, 1980. Pg. 1.

²⁵³ Paul, Heath Hoeffel. “Fort Chaffee’s Unwanted Cubans.” *New York Times*, Dec 21, 1980. Pg. 3.

needed for their total immigration. Officials knew of these harsh realities and had the difficult task of telling them that their freedom depended on a fundamental change of who they were.

Originally, refugees of the Mariel boatlift were a subject of controversy, but their place within the Fort Chaffee community began to change and take new shapes. The original protest in support of immigrants' freedom ended in violence and accusations of communist subversion. However, local community actors such as Alina Fernandez co-opted the narrative into the belief that relatively few of the exiles were undesirable. While some people within the community were discriminatory, others came to see the exiles through the lens of a white savior complex. The perceived anti-communist opinions united Arkansans and Cubans under the commonality of hating communism. Through community involvement and local print news, the refugees became friends and not enemies, a group that could be molded into the perfect Americans. High schoolers, college professors, and religious officials began to reward behavior associated with being a "good" American and discouraged anything that was perceived as being different and non-conforming to traditional values. While some Arkansans eventually became friends with the refugees of the Mariel boatlift, many continued to view the refugees as different and dangerous.

Conclusion: Lasting Fears of 'Them' Becoming 'Us'

Due to President Carter's handling of the Mariel Boatlift, and other factors including the Iran Hostage Crisis, Ronald Reagan won the 1980 presidential election. Acting quickly after his election. Reagan wanted an immediate resolution to the Cuban

refugee crisis. He claimed that all Cuban immigration going forward would not be met with open arms, but rather the same treatment as any other unauthorized arrival.²⁵⁴ These changes in policy reflected not only a shift in immigration policy, but a change in the U.S. perception of Cuba and heightened Cold War tensions. Ronald Reagan's Secretary of State, Alexander Haig was quoted in one of Nancy Reagan's memoirs as stating in a National Security Council meeting as saying, "You just give me the word and I'll turn that fucking island [Cuba] into a parking lot."²⁵⁵ Tensions between U.S. and Cuba severed the working immigration and visitation relations, weakening the ties between the two countries.

In the modern day, we continually see lasting fears from the Cold War era. In conservative political discussions, Cuba is often used as a direct comparison to the United States. A July 17th, 2021 Tweet from conservative representative Matthew Gaetz shared a video of himself and Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene in front of a Benjamin Franklin memorial. "I know many of us are concerned about what is happening in Cuba, but I am far more concerned that the United States is becoming Cuba."²⁵⁶ Gaetz continues in an angry tone arguing that gun control, a lack of freedom of speech, and other policies represents "a descent into socialism."²⁵⁷ However, this anger and political persona is representative of a reignition of xenophobia, and hate of immigrants from throughout the Americas. In 2023, statewide bans throughout the United States echo

²⁵⁴ Eckstein, Susan Eva. *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pg. 141.

²⁵⁵ Kami, Hideaki. *Diplomacy Meets Migration: US Relations with Cuba During the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pg. 191. From Nancy Reagan and William Novak, *My Turn: The Memoirs of Nancy Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1989), Pg. 242.

²⁵⁶ Gaetz, Matthew. "Untitled Tweet." July 17th, 2021. Twitter.com.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

these fears of not only immigration, but personal identity. In Florida, a major population center for Cuban immigrants, growing bans are limiting public access to information regarding race, gender, and sexuality. Currently, HB 1557 created by the Governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, has banned the teaching, education, and discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity between kindergarten and third grade.²⁵⁸ Another bill currently proposed by Governor DeSantis (HB 999) would ban the education of “unproven, theoretical, or exploratory content.”²⁵⁹ This includes a large chunk of groundbreaking historical works such as the 1619 Project by historian Nikole Hannah-Jones.²⁶⁰ Discussions of race are being censored on all levels, including Governor DeSantis being directly responsible for college professors’ tenure review, allowing the state of Florida to fire college professors for race-based discussion or analysis. Historians cited here would be included in this ban, potentially losing their jobs for their research on Cuban immigration and other fields discussing race or diaspora studies if the bill passes.

These trends of state bans are national, including many traditionally conservative states across the southern United States. On March 14th, 2023, Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders of Arkansas was the first of a growing number of state governors to ban gender affirming care to minors.²⁶¹ Arkansas HB 1570 gives authorities the ability to imprison medical professionals who provide this care for up to 15 years.²⁶² Transgender and

²⁵⁸ Florida Judiciary Committee. “House Bill 1557” The Florida Senate, August 1, 2022.

²⁵⁹ Florida Postsecondary Education & Workforce Subcommittee. “House Bill 999” The Florida Senate, April 17, 2023.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Arkansas State Legislature. “HB1570.” The State of Arkansas, February 25, 2021.

See also for the signing of

DeMillo, Andrew. “Sanders Signs Arkansas Gender-Affirming Care Malpractice Bill into Law.” Public Broadcasting Network. March 14th, 2023

²⁶² Ibid.

genderfluid people are increasingly becoming targeted by conservative communities and state officials across the southern United States. Reignited fears based on race, gender identity, and immigration are a direct result of the historic discrimination and otherizing within these states. Forty-three years after the arrival of the *Marielitos* in Arkansas, bans and bills reenforce the hate and discrimination Cubans felt from the community and government officials at Fort Chaffee.

Through changing immigration policy in the 1960s to the 1980s, Mariel Boatlift Cubans were treated differently than their earlier counterparts. The majority of Arkansans did not accept the arrival of Cuban exiles, and many called for their deportation, echoing earlier xenophobic fears. From shirts encouraging violence towards Cuban refugees, to attempted religious conversion, Arkansans wanted these Cubans to assimilate or leave the state. Though government officials mainly aligned with these fears, efforts were made to find peaceful moments of compromise. Loose border security within the living areas at Fort Chaffee and scarce government resources left refugees free to create their own identities within their new American home. From music, to Santería, to genderfluidity, Cuban refugees expressed themselves at Fort Chaffee, protected from the discriminatory gaze of officials and Arkansans through their immigration status of “Cuban-Haitian Refugee: Status Pending.” While ultimately *Marielitos* across the United States were seen as criminals and undesirables, the refugees themselves often acted with non-violence and self-sufficiency. Most importantly, these Cuban refugees wanted to be free to express themselves, and free to live independently from government intervention within their daily lives. Through this focused lens of examining Fort Chaffee, my hope is that the research and themes explored here may be able to be expanded to both other military

internment centers and to Cold War immigration histories. Even with their eventual freedom, in the modern era politicians and parts of the southern United States continue to define *Marielitos* and other immigrant groups as “them” rather than “us.”²⁶³

²⁶³ Goodman, Adam. *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pg. 5.

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