

Kodak in Krome: Photography, Migrant Detention, and the Haitian Diaspora

erica.toffoli@mail.utoronto.ca

por Erica Toffoli

PhD Candidate in the History Department at the University of Toronto (Canadá)

Abstract

In the early 1980s, Miami's Krome Service Processing Facility served as a detention site for the Haitian asylum-seekers who landed on Florida's shores. In this article, I examine how photojournalists and artists represented incarcerated refugees. Collectively, their work contested migrants' vulnerability to intrusive surveillance, their separation from the rights-bearing citizenry, and their suspension in juridical limbo. Drawing on visual and written archives, a photo-essay, an art installation, interviews, and newspaper articles, I investigate the potentialities—and limits—of using the camera to protest the conditions of migrant detention. This study of Krome photography traces the political functions of visual representation in the history of immigration detention, illuminating photography's status as a medium that recorded—and was used to protest—core features of incarcerated Latin American migrants' experience.

Keywords: Detention sights; Haitian refugees; Krome; Migrant detention; Photography

Una Kodak en Krome: fotografía, detención de migrantes y la diáspora haitiana

Resumen

En la década de 1980, los refugiados haitianos fueron detenidos en la instalación de procesamiento de servicios de Krome en Miami, Florida. En este artículo, examino cómo los fotoperiodistas y artistas representaron a los refugiados encarcelados. Colectivamente, su trabajo impugnó la vulnerabilidad de los migrantes a la vigilancia intrusiva, su separación de la ciudadanía portadora de derechos y su suspensión en el limbo jurídico. Analizo documentos de archivos visuales y escritos, un ensayo fotográfico, una instalación de arte, entrevistas y artículos periodísticos para investigar las potencialidades y los límites del uso de la cámara para protestar las condiciones de detención de migrantes. Este estudio de la fotografía de Krome rastrea las funciones políticas de la representación visual en la historia de la detención de inmigrantes e ilumina cómo se ha utilizado la cámara para registrar - y protestar - características centrales de la experiencia de los migrantes latinoamericanos.

Palabras clave: Lugares de detención; Refugiados haitianos; Krome; Detención de migrantes; Fotografía

1. Introduction

At the height of summer, temperatures in the Florida Everglades climb to a sultry 35 degrees. Human habitation is sparse. Nature reigns. At night, a tranquil silence saturates the damp night air. The Krome Service Processing Centre stands on the edge of this wild space. In the early years of the Cold War, Krome was a Nike missile base. By 1980, it housed the Haitian asylum seekers who landed on Florida's shores (Dow, 2005: 7; Lipman, 2013: 116; Lloyd and Mountz, 2018: 69-76).

Photojournalists flocked to Krome. *TIME*'s Jean-Bernard Diederich spent years covering the facility. He watched the INS attempt to "change the snap image" of Krome by giving it a two million dollar "facelift" (Diederich, "Haitians TK: 2," 5 May 1982). Soccer fields, basketball courts, pinball games, and television sets were installed, all in an effort to make Krome look less like what it was—a "prison" where refugees lived in "limbo." As he toured the compound one morning in June 1981, Diederich met a detainee who was incensed by his presence. " 'Go take Reagan's photograph,' " the Haitian declared sharply. " 'I'm too ugly, poor, and black for your Kodak' " (Diederich, "haitians, tk: 1," June 1981). Using the camera as a metaphor, the migrant condemned how value was assigned in American society. Representation, he argued, was a privilege monopolized by the wealthy and the white. This was a scathing accusation. Yet it was also a provocation.

Krome was an exceptional space. Like contemporary detention facilities, it quarantined those who lacked the protections of citizenship. In the early-1980s, three photographers turned their lenses on the facility. Two—Diederich and Michael Carlebach—were photojournalists. Another, Gary Monroe, was an artist. Each worked within the U.S. social documentary tradition pioneered by Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, and the Farm Security Administration's (FSA) photographers. Early documentarians put urban poverty, the horrors of industrial capitalism, and the burdens of socio-economic turmoil in their crosshairs (Lamunière, 2012; Macieski, 2015; Blair and Rosenberg, 2012). Like their predecessors, Diederich, Carlebach, and Monroe sought to use the camera to illuminate the condition of men, women, and children who lived on the margins. In 1980s Miami, they zeroed-in on a new target: the undocumented Caribbean refugees pushed to U.S. shores by political chaos and state repression in their homeland. Importantly, these racialized men, women, and children inhabited a carceral space that was, conventionally, thought to be off limits. As heirs to the documentary impulse, Diederich, Carlebach, and Monroe used photography

for the same basic purpose as their forebears: to educate, inform, and—ideally—inspire change. Their images—or “detention sights”—exposed the most damaging features of interned migrants’ experience: their vulnerability to intrusive surveillance, their unnatural separation from the rights-bearing citizenry, and the physical and psychological torments they endured while suspended in juridical limbo. The history of Krome photography illuminates the complexities, possibilities, and limits of using the camera to resist the violence of migrant detention.

2. In sight of heaven and on the verge of hell

From the start, Krome was a spectacle. For the INS and the Cuban Haitian Task Force (CHTF), it embodied Associate Attorney General Rudolph Giuliani’s pledge that there would be “ ‘no vacillation’ ” in efforts to combat the “refugee invasion.” To Diederich, the theatricality of this approach was glaringly obvious. He accused Reagan and his cronies of using “Haitians to dramatize their decision to recapture the country’s borders, because they are poor and black and mostly unwanted” (Diederich, “Draft: Haitians TK: 2,” June 1981). Foreign dignitaries and reporters—hailing from Italy, Somalia, Morocco, Japan, Norway, and France—travelled to the Everglades to visit the absurd “tourist attraction” (Mahoney and Carlebach, 1982: 8). In 1981, Diederich confirmed that Krome was a global sensation: “film crews from throughout the world now come to Florida to get shots of Krome—the other side of Disneyworld” (Diederich, “Going to America,” August 1981). The CHTF took great pains to “demonstrate that conditions weren’t” utterly “deplorable” (Mahoney and Carlebach, 1982: 8). But access was always tightly controlled. Camp personnel were prohibited from making statements to the press “without the expressed consent of the camp coordinator” (“Transition Plan for Krome South,” 11 September 1980). In August 1981, a French television crew was turned away. “ ‘The people are far too tense inside,’ ” INS spokesperson Beverly McFarland admitted (Diederich, “Going to America,” August 1981). Normally, photographers were barred from entering Krome at night, on weekends, and during riots or other disturbances (Ryals, 1982: 9D). Krome was not off limits—but admission was restricted.

For their part, detainees had a fraught relationship with the camera. Many longed for the chance to be captured on film. In Carlebach’s experience, “most...did not object to being photographed...That made them complicit...a role they seemed happy to assume. There was never any shortage of Haitians willing to pose for me” (Carlebach, 2017). Monroe

remembers greater indifference. “The detainees were somewhat oblivious to me,” he recalls. “It was just no big deal. I might have been a mystery to any who bothered to take note of me” (Monroe, 2018).

Diederich’s records tell a more intricate story. Detainees viewed photographers with a mix of suspicion, frustration, and faith. Some evaded the camera entirely. In Diederich’s estimation, that impulse was symptomatic of the fact that “During their year-long detention...Haitians became the most famous group of refugees. They were the most photographed. TV crews from throughout the world caught them against the barbed wire-topped fences” (Diederich, “Krome Decision,” 22 June 1982). From detainees’ perspective, most of this coverage was useless—at best. At worst, it was deceitful and manipulative. In the eyes of many, camera-wielding reporters were extensions of the INS’s surveillance network. Diederich found that refugees “don’t take kindly to newsmen because they...feel that their views are told or reported back to the camp commander and can cause them trouble” (Diederich, “Haitians/The INS Krome Processing Center,” 11 May 1982). This was a common refrain. “Newsmen,” one group of Haitians averred, “were only spying for the Chicano Camp Commander Ruiz.” Reporters, they charged, were part of a cabal of informants that included “a priest...a spy sent in to learn what they were up to” (Diederich, “Haitians TK: 1,” 20 May 1982). Detainees blamed camera-toting visitors for styling Krome as a paradise, towing the INS line, and bolstering the Reagan administration’s claims: “[They] no longer greet the photographer kindly. Some refuse to permit their photo to be taken. They feel...they are guinea pigs to the publicity Reagan needs to halt the illegal flow of immigrants” (Diederich, “Haitians,” 1982). Others loathed being fodder for outlets concerned only with snapping-up the juiciest, most sensational stories. When Diederich spied an “ABC cameraman getting footage of the Haitians,” he noted that “many object to being the object of interest” (Diederich, “The Haitians,” 9 July 1982). They were “tired, and often hostile to TV cameras whom they felt were exploiting them like ‘animals’ ” (Diederich, “Haitians,” 16 July 1982). Many refused to let photographers steal their likeness. When Diederich entered one of Krome’s make-shift classrooms, the pupils put their heads down on their desks. They “hid from the camera.” “ ‘No one wants [their] photo taken any more,’ ” an elderly inmate explained. “ ‘They think the pictures are used to show that they [are] okay in Krome.’ ”

But consider what Diederich’s interlocutor did next. After explaining why the students turned away, the man thrust his leg out. He showed the photographer how his limb, “broken near the ankle, had not mended properly.” Even as the man articulated

refugees' desire to protect themselves from opportunistic photographers, he begged Diederich to look at his poorly-healed injury—a product of the less-than-stellar medical care he received at Krome. This was not the only instance in which Diederich was invited to inspect Haitians' bodies. Colbert Damas, a 26-year-old native of Aux Cayes, "lifted up his shirt to show off his enlarged breasts." He told Diederich that " 'They took our blood and said it was caused by the product put in our food to...(curb sex drive). The medication...left a stone behind in my breasts' " (Diederich, "Haitians TK: 2," 20 May 1982). Like the elderly refugee, Damas wanted to be seen. Independently and without provocation, the men directed Diederich's gaze to injuries sustained during their imprisonment. Haitians were acutely aware of the deceptive, instrumental uses to which their images might be put. Via subtle acts, they resisted being complicit in these manipulations. Yet they also detected the medium's more subversive potential. Intentionally, they sought opportunities to make their reality visible to photographers who were willing to look in a responsible, ethical manner. In Krome, there was no one way of thinking about what it meant to be seen.

3. Three lenses on Krome

Diederich had unique insight into the forces that drove Haitians to Florida's shores. In 1949, the New Zealand native arrived in Haiti. He founded a newspaper, *Haiti Sun*. After little more than a decade, he was exiled by François "Papa Doc" Duvalier. For the rest of his career, Diederich worked to expose the evils of dictatorship. He also came to rely on the camera to "witness history" (Diederich, 2003: 1). On assignment for *TIME*, Diederich spent rolls of film chronicling Krome. Despite this voluminous output, a rare few of his shots graced the magazine's pages (Diederich, "For 1,800 Haitians—Freedom," 1982: 18). Today, the better part of his Krome photography is lost. *TIME* discarded his negatives (Hooper, 2019). Only his correspondence and field notes survive. These are remarkable documents—detailed, evocative, and moving. They preserve the raw, turbulent emotions—hope to despair, anger to disillusionment—that wracked detainees. They allow us to paint a rich, textured portrait of the lives that Krome's photographers immortalized on film.

Carlebach's path to the facility was more circuitous. When he arrived at Krome in the autumn of 1980, he was a freshly-minted graduate of Florida State University. He split his time between teaching photography at the University of Miami and moonlighting as a freelancer for *The Miami Herald*. His frequent collaborator was journalist Larry Mahoney. The pair "shared similar political views" (Carlebach, 2017).

Like Carlebach, Mahoney had a steady job. As a State Department “spokesman,” he styled Krome as a haven. Time and again, he riffed on a “basic strategy”: “point out that if refugees from such a backward country were turned loose in the streets, they would be victimized...the Kromes were set up for their own protection.” The CHTF instructed Mahoney to “find happy stories to put out to the press” (Mahoney and Carlebach, 1982: 7, 9-10). Despite his best efforts, observers offered less than glowing assessments. Mahoney informed the CHTF’s Public Affairs Office that “*The Herald’s* first ‘inside the fence’ report on Krome...could have been better. The facts are pretty well screwed up” (Mahoney, Miami Working Group, “Media report and clippings,” 15 September 1980). Swiftly, he realized that selling Krome was an impossible—and disgraceful—pursuit. He relayed this disillusionment to his superiors: “the Haitian thing is deteriorating everywhere...in the media... everywhere” (Miller, “Miami Morning Report,” 5 September 1980). After less than a year as Krome’s “apologist,” Mahoney did a total 180. He likens his conversion to that of a repentant ad man guilty of glorifying toxic products and institutions: “Did you hear the one about the PR man’s hell? It is having to represent tobacco companies or South Africa...though I wasn’t defending lung cancer or apartheid, it was not an easy job to explain how such an institution had come to exist in the United States...when the subject of conditions at Krome came up, there wasn’t much to say: again, an apology.” Mahoney grew disgusted with Krome’s heinous “indignities”: its “indifferent” personnel, “squalid” quarters, and “dehumanizing” atmosphere. Finally, he quit his post “in frustration” (Mahoney and Carlebach, 1982: 7).

In Carlebach’s photographs, we have evidence of the abject conditions that so churned Mahoney’s stomach. These images became weapons. Technically, Carlebach was also “a member” of the CHTF. But he retained ownership of his negatives. “I had total control of my images,” he explains. “I developed the film, selected and printed the pictures...I chose the photographs to submit to the government and to *Tropic*.” As the pair crafted “Welcome to Camp Krome” for *Tropic*, Carlebach embraced a tension that absorbed his thinking as a young scholar. “I saw my work at Krome as similar to photographs made for the Farm Security Administration,” he recalls. “Their purpose, like mine, was to produce documentary photographs...to educate the public. There was a propagandistic aspect to Depression-era photography, as there was to my work in the 1980s. However, in both cases, the propaganda was based on truth.” For Mahoney and Carlebach, “propaganda” was not a dirty word. The duo put Carlebach’s socially-committed, “propagandistic” images to a subversive end: unmasking the “sordid

intricacies of official immigration policy" (Carlebach, 2017). Their photo-essay was equal parts exposé and bleak tragedy ([Image 1](#)). In disturbing detail, it revealed the damages wrought by incarceration in Krome.

Monroe left the message behind his photography far more inscrutable. From his days as an art history student at the University of Colorado, he developed an abiding faith in the camera's ability to capture reality in all its complexity. Tellingly, his Master's thesis was titled "The Spirit of Fact" (Monroe, "The Spirit of Fact," 1977: 1). Monroe spent the late-1970s documenting South Beach's "old world Jewry." Soon, he spied new figures on Miami's "golden sidewalks": young Haitians. "I'd photographed the endings of one people's journey," he reasoned. "So now might look at the beginning of another's" (Monroe, 2018). He set his sights on Krome. At first, he was turned away. But he was persistent. He prepared a portfolio of his South Beach images. He solicited endorsements from bigwigs like Florida's governor, Bob Graham (Ryals, 1982: 9D). Krome's managers must have been convinced. After three weeks of waiting, Monroe landed an appointment with Commander Cecilio Ruiz. Krome's director "welcomed" him to photograph the facility. Today, Monroe chalks-up Ruiz's acquiescence to the fact that he styled himself as a "private" artist rather than a member of the "public" press: "I'm not a journalist, and this is why Ruiz let me in" (Monroe, 2018). Monroe came away with over 1500 work prints. In September 1982, The Gallery at Miami-Dade Community College hosted *Detention at Krome: Photographs of Haitian Refugees*. The exhibit featured 64 of Monroe's images.

It is difficult to divine what Monroe wanted viewers to see. Certainly, he intended that his work do what, in his view, photography does best: capture history. As Associated Press photographer Pete Wright averred, " 'Monroe...approached Krome as a historical event, not as a news event' " (Ryals, 1982: 9D). Where there was history, there was also art. In 1981, Monroe told an audience at Harvard's Center for the Visual Arts that "photographs taken for historical documentary purposes can also be works of art" (Dobbs, 1981: 7D). For Monroe, the photographer, subject, and viewer operate on different planes. He thus makes no claim to acting as a champion or critic of Krome. He leans on a tenet of documentary photography: "The photographer's job (as I see it) is essentially to stay out of the way. The less we do, the better" (Monroe, 2017). In keeping with this philosophy, he refuses to assign meaning to his images. As the preface to *Detention* acknowledged, "he does not intrude on viewers' individual responses" (*Detention at Krome*, 1982: i). He sees himself as an artist removed from the realm of politics. "I'm not a journalist nor interested in the political landscape. I'm definitely not a storyteller," he vows (Monroe, 2018). When *Detention*

debuted, Monroe affirmed that his “ ‘interest wasn’t political’ ”: ‘I am interested in photography. What I have to say is in the photographs. The photos are everything’ ” (Ryals, 1982: 9D). Even as he delved deeper into Haitians’ lifeways—he completed a photographic survey of Haiti in 1985—he clung to this detached stance. “ ‘I’m not a reporter,’ he clarified in a 1986 interview. “ ‘I’m not a war correspondent...I just want to photograph them. They’re a mystery to me. And it’s just as good, I think, that they remain that way’ ” (Marbella, 1986: 4E).

Diederich, Carlebach, and Monroe reached Krome via different routes. The fruits of their labors are distinct: a lost visual archive, a graphic photo-essay, and an enigmatic art installation. In their shared commitment to exhuming the lives of Krome’s detainees, the trio elevated migrants who would otherwise be marginalized into subjects worthy of consideration. They transformed refugees—like Diederich’s irate interlocutor—into the heart of images that contest universal features of detention.

4. In a landscape of surveillance

At Krome, the state watched from all directions. Each time he entered the compound, Diederich was struck by the “barbed-wire topped fences and prison-camp style watch towers” (Diederich, “Haitians Tk: 1,” June 1981). Together, the towering observation posts and jagged loops “conjure[d] up the horror of...internment, and prison camps of a less civilized era” (Diederich, “Haitians TK: 1,” 5 May 1982). Investigative journalists compared Krome to a different sort of observation facility: the zoo. John Rothschild remarked that, while the animals at Miami’s Metro Zoo were “free to romp in minimum security...just a few miles north,” Krome’s prisoners were “herded at much higher density into a rockpit” (Diederich, “Haitians,” 16 July 1982). Detainees deemed the zoo analogy an apt metaphor. “ ‘This is a place for pigs,’ ” one young man told Diederich. “ ‘No, donkeys,’ ” another corrected. “ ‘No monkeys, and black monkeys,’ ” the group concurred (Diederich, “Haitians TK: 1,” 20 May 1982). Observers and inmates likened Krome to two zones where bodies are contained, monitored, and displayed. In both spaces, surveillance is routine. For inspectors, it is a conduit to security. For the objects of scrutiny, it is a nagging—often violent—intrusion. Inside Krome, surveyors objectified migrants in invasive, demeaning ways. Yet even as prying eyes bore down on them, refugees looked back.

From the moment they set foot on Florida's sandy beaches, migrants entered a landscape of surveillance. The CHTF revamped Dade County's Federal Correctional Institute into a screening site for new arrivals. First, detainees were "assigned" a "sequential number." One-by-one, their chests and abdomens were shot by an X-ray technician's lens. Nurses drew samples of their blood to test for the myriad diseases that Haitians were suspected of carrying. Finally, refugees moved to the last hurdle: a visual examination ("Transition Plan for Krome South," 11 September 1980). To pin-down the ages of migrants who arrived without birth certificates, personnel inspected their teeth. In recounting her uncle's imprisonment at Krome, novelist Edwidge Danticat reflects on "this agonizing reminder of slavery auction blocks, where mouths were pried open to determine worth and state of health" (Danticat, 2007: 212). Here though, inspection had a more bureaucratic *raison d'être*: the INS collected data in order to catalog and track unauthorized entries. Inspectors probed and penetrated refugees' bodies. Clinicians conducted "visual examination[s] of skin." They sliced through flesh to sample "dermatoses suspect[ed] of syphilis, yaws, leprosy, [and] scabies." To detect infectious bacteria invisible to the naked eye, screeners ordered "darkfield examination[s] of suspect lesions." Women endured the most invasive inspections: bimanual examination of the pelvic organs ("Transition Plan for Krome South," 11 September 1980). Refugees grew accustomed to offering-up their bodies. One of Danticat's interlocutors showed-off his arms and torso, both etched with "rows of keloid scars." For the refugee, displaying his wounds was routine: "he was used to showing his scars...to prove he deserved to stay" (Danticat, 2007: 213).

Once locked in Krome, migrants' every move was rigorously policed. In May 1982, detainees were issued vibrant orange overalls, now the official uniform of the camp. Refugees protested vehemently. "Time and again," Diederich observed, "they repeated 'We are monkeys enough and will not put that monkey outfit on.'" The prison-style jumpsuit made them far more vulnerable to detection. Many told Diederich that "they would not have a chance in this uniform, since it would be easily spotted by Border Patrol 'copters...no way could they slip unobtrusively into 'Little Haiti'...where many have relatives and friends" (Diederich, "Haitians, TK: 1," 20 May 1982). The jumpsuit was a bulls-eye. At the same time, it demarcated them from Krome's guards. It reinforced the hierarchical distinction between overseers and detainees. Like the screening process, the uniform reduced refugees to classifiable, dangerous specimens.

The carceral get-up was part and parcel of the CHTF's strategy for correcting what Director Christian Holmes identified as a "security void." Soon after the CHTF assumed

responsibility for Krome, a nervous Holmes informed Assistant Attorney General Paul Michele of his fear that “The population...[is] gradually rising...the potential for problems exists, especially as the few bad elements realize the security vacuum and move to establish their rei[g]n...five Federal Protective Service Officers and several contract security personnel maintain law and order...Their authority is limited” (Holmes, “Security at Krome North and South,” 20 September 1980). Funds were poured into enhancing surveillance. The 1981 budget allotted \$1250 for “Perimeter Patrol Cycles” (U.S. Department of Justice, “Reimbursement Agreement Between Agencies,” 6 April 1981). Every half hour, guards circled the camp (Gigante, Memo on “Transition Plan for Krome South,” 12 September 1980). To prevent clandestine activity, advisors recommended that light fixtures ring the tents on Krome’s grounds (Harps, “Krome North,” 26 January 1981). An elaborate command structure regulated security officers’ responsibilities. Camp Coordinators were the chief overseers. Throughout the day, they “supervised” refugees “directly” in accordance with the “responsibility of the Supervisor to keep order.” Guards watched “at a distance from the camp’s population” during meals and recreation. Personnel were to project a united front. They were barred from “contradicting” or “challenging” orders “while in the presence of a refugee.” When a new shift began, each guard ‘inform[ed] his counterpart... of all which has occurred throughout the day” to “help the performance of the second shift’s member” (“Transition Plan for Krome South,” 11 September 1980).

Usually, photographers were prohibited from documenting Krome’s surveillance apparatus. Carlebach’s creative license did not extend to “guards and other camp personnel...as a rule, they were off limits” (Carlebach, 2017). Despite the ban, he stole a few shots of officers in white uniforms monitoring refugees caged behind the facility’s fence (Images 820429E#11, 851121A#27, 1980; and 851121A#24, 1985). The screening process was kept under tighter wraps. Only Monroe was granted access. Ruiz, it seems, did more than allow him to tour Krome at his leisure, sporting a “No Escort Required” badge around his neck (Monroe, 2018). The director—whom refugees dubbed the “Papa Doc of Krome”—invited Monroe to document the inspection process (Diederich, “Haitians, TK: 5,” 9 July 1982). Hours after their first meeting, Ruiz summoned Monroe in the dead of night. “He wanted me to see the ‘processing’ procedure as a boat arrived in the Keys and the refugees were bussed to Krome,” Monroe explains. “I photographed them getting off the bus and being ushered into the processing building, and what follows, from being ID photographed to issued clean clothes” (Monroe, 2018). Monroe’s final stop was the

disinfection area. Here, he shot the most provocative image in his Krome series—"The Quelling" ([Image 2](#)).

"Cecilio directed me into the showers to photograph," Monroe remembers (Monroe, 2018). Before him, a group of men washed each other with Kwell shampoo. Aghast, Monroe followed orders: "I was taken aback but I photographed" (Monroe, 2018). Four decades later, this scene remains seared into Monroe's memory. It is easy to see why. Formally, the photograph replicates the dehumanizing discipline enforced by the detention regime. And it exposes the state's true, brutish colors. It reveals what screeners demanded of migrants who were utterly exhausted from a treacherous journey across Caribbean waters. They were stripped naked. They were herded onto cold, slippery ceramic tiles. They were forced to rub an insecticide onto their skin. All the while, Krome's wardens watched. The viewer is thrust into the place of these overseers. And that is exactly why Monroe's photograph is powerful, if disturbing. It exposes a cruel truth: state-sanctioned inspection protocols made abjection the *very first* thing that refugees encountered when they arrived on American soil.

If the camera imitated the surveyor's gaze, it also permitted migrants to look back. Consider Carlebach's portrait of a Haitian girl ([Image 3](#)). The "one part of the Krome story that most affected me," he recalls, "was the treatment of what the State Department called 'unaccompanied minors.' These were children who arrived without parents, though nearly all of them had come to the US with an adult—an aunt or uncle, a cousin, an older friend. These kids were separated from their companions...Most of them seemed traumatized and sad" (Carlebach, 2017). Carlebach's subject posed in front of her bed, flanked by brick walls and a few possessions. He kneeled. She peered down at the lens as the shutter closed. In the photograph, sunlight bounces off one side of her face. The other half is cast in shadow. This is a far more imposing posture than the one she assumed when she took her ID photograph. That document identified her as a ward of the state by displaying her facial features in precise detail. Here, those markers are obscured. In fact, *she* seems to be monitoring the viewer. Like the children pictured on *Tropic's* cover, she makes it clear that those who were inspected *always* looked back.

5. Separation

Late one sizzling July day, Diederich paused in front of Krome's fence as he left the facility. A refugee peered through two diamond-shaped openings in the wire. He held the

photographer's gaze. Desperately, the detainee asked: " 'When, when?' " " 'Soon, bientôt,' " Diederich's INS chaperone interjected. To Diederich, this promise seemed hollow. "Maybe," he reflected, "in two weeks they'll be out but in Krome today they all felt they still had an eternity before them" (Diederich, "Haitians TK: 5," 9 July 1982). Diederich's field notes are peppered with these descriptions of the "sea of faces at the wire fence" that greeted and bid farewell to *TIME*'s team (Diederich, "Haitians tk: 4," 11 June 1981). The barrier was the crown jewel of Krome's security infrastructure. Symbolically and experientially, it was the nexus between confinement and freedom.

For the state, the fence was a robust—if imperfect—stand-in for human eyes. In 1981, funds for a state-of-the-art fence sensor system were the single largest expense in the CHTF's budget: \$9000 (U.S. Department of Justice, "Reimbursement Agreement Between Agencies," 6 April 1981). Anxious inspectors harped on the need to reinforce the fence's weak spots. In September 1980, advisors concluded that a comprehensive "security plan" required "placing another fence around the inside perimeter of the camp" (Mitchell, "Re: Internal Security Arrangements for Krome South," 21 September 1980). Months later, architect Franz Krebs catalogued the barricade's inadequacies: "at some areas the wire mesh does not extend down to ground level...[there are] gaps of as much as 6 inches beneath long stretches...and at two sets of gates. Where the ground is soft, it is fairly easy for a person to crawl through... A single wire can be cut easily...Security could be improved by adding wire mesh along critical portions of the fence" (Krebs, "Architectural Survey Report, Krome South Facility," 13 February 1981). Theoretically, these augmentations would lighten the burden of observation borne by Krome's overseers. An impenetrable fence would make it loads easier for overseers to do their " 'job' " of, as one guard gruffly put it, " 'hold[ing]' refugees "until they can be deported' " (Greater Miami Religious Community, "Description of Krome," 16 October 1981).

To the American public, Krome's fence quickly became a potent symbol of the detention site. Citizens were taught to view the perimeter and its most vulnerable zone—the gate—with a mixture of reverence and fear. Major press outlets painted the fence as an essential barrier that quarantined dangerous trespassers and kept unruly activists at bay. Heated protests initiated by what the media framed as hysterical, hyper-aggressive black bodies were staples of nightly news broadcasts. In truth, these demonstrations were provoked by frustration over the glacial pace at which asylum claims were processed. Diederich described one "melee". South Florida television viewers were shocked to see on their Sunday evening news the usually docile...Haitian refugees charging the front gate of

Krome...In a cloud of teargas and smoke from sawgrass fires...the Haitians, some with banners [reading] "Let My People Go," scuffled with the baton-wielding guards...Haitians [threw] back the teargas canisters while others were throwing such available missiles as stones and bottles. "We've had demonstrations out here before," said...[one official], 'but never one like this where people rushed the gate and came up to the perimeter. We have never had such an explosive situation.

On scene, protestors affirmed that they were "upset and frustrated" because "they couldn't see their relatives inside to assure they were okay" (Diederich, "Haitians, TK: 1," 30 December 1981). Newscasts on the Big Three networks featured segments on the incident. Viewers watched throngs of Haitians storm Krome's gates. As they peeped through the wire, they saw guards accost those who breached the barrier ([Image 4](#)).

Plainly, demonstrators were outmatched by Krome's overseers. Haitians had small rocks and bottles at their disposal. Guards wielded bats and lobbed tear gas. Trusted anchors told Americans a different tale. NBC's Jane Pauley wailed that "immigration officers were *pelted* with rocks and bottles" (Clip #514758, *NBC Evening News*, 27 December 1981). Over on ABC, footage of guards beating protestors and hurling tear gas canisters danced on-screen as Dan Rather's baritone voice-over justified their actions matter-of-factly: officers merely "dealt with" the insurgents (Clip #275089, *CBS Evening News*, 28 December 1981). Here the fence was depicted as the sole barrier between irrational, frenzied protestors and the valiant servants of the state who protected the nation's security.

Photographers were hypnotized by the barricade ([Images 5 and 6](#)). Their images offer something more than scenes of rabid anarchy. Many are quite calm. Diederich shot several photographs of Haitians "looking longingly through the wire" or "moving down" the fence. These images tease viewers with a chance to reach quarantined subjects. Yet that link is always fragmentary. Even as they promise union, their form obstructs that possibility. This tension marred the very act of photography. As he captured one Haitian's portrait through the wire, Diederich noticed a change come over the man. The refugee "smiled when someone suggested the doors of Krome might at last open...his smile was fleeting. Haitians have heard such reports before...they have proved to be false" (Diederich, "The Haitians," 9 July 1982).

In *Tropic's* opening shot ([Image 7](#)), a migrant trapped behind the wire beckoned the reader to "hear many of the things" that happened in the compound, sequestered from public view (Mahoney and Carlebach, 1982: 8). In the image, cross-hatched wire segments

the detainee's face and torso. He is sliced into shards, like pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. Formally, the image preserves the separation manufactured by detention. Just as the detention regime bred an absurd division between refugees and citizens, the image's form cements a stubborn separation between subject and viewer. Yet it also petrifies the detainee's plea for recognition.

Visually, these sorts of photographs illustrated what many believed the fence symbolized. Inflammatory portrayals of Krome's perimeter were punctuated by more reasoned assessments. Astute observers saw the fence for what it was—a barricade that isolated innocent "outsiders." Miami's religious leaders were disgusted by the "lethal coils edged with razor-like blades... [a] weapon intended to numb and slash a man or woman so badly that their bleeding body will be unfit for escape" (Greater Miami Religious Community, "Description of Krome," 16 October 1981). Prolific journalist Carl Rowan decried Krome's fence as a "barrier of shame" no better than the Berlin Wall. Its existence, he proclaimed, ought to make Americans pause before issuing sanctimonious praise for the United States' unimpeachable moral fibre. After listening to one of Reagan's speeches before the British Parliament, Rowan lamented the "grim irony...that only hours before...I was behind a 'wall' of America's making—The walls of barbed wire at Miami's Krome Avenue detention center where my own country keeps locked up in cruel boredom more than 500 Haitians who fled their country in search of freedom (Rowan, 1982: A15). Advocates chastised Krome—and detention policy writ large—by referencing the fence's connotations. As one Miami Beach resident told Diederich: " 'At least Ellis Island, where my father came ashore, didn't look like a concentration camp' " (Diederich, "Haitians tk: 2," June 1981). Krome's perimeter was a sickening perversion of all that "the gate" had stood for since Emma Lazarus anointed the Statue of Liberty as the "Mother of Exiles"—a beacon at "sea-washed, sunset gates." In the image of the fence, many found a symbol for the xenophobia that laced immigration policy. Graphically, Carlebach and Monroe captured that reality.

6. Suspension

In Krome, migrants' lives were put on hold. Cramped quarters, meager resources, and poor infrastructure compounded their distress. Internally, CHTF officials admitted that Krome endangered the United States's reputation as a champion of human rights. In September 1980, officials warned that "We have been strongly criticized for conditions at two refugee

sites...Krome South...where 1,000 Haitians are being held pending resettlement...is severely overcrowded. The lack of sewer, water, housing, and recreational facilities make it a significant public health hazard. Pat Harris and Vic Palmieri have stated in strongest terms that we are vulnerable to charges of human rights violations there" (Eidenberg and White, "Cuban/Haitian Report," 5 September 1980).

Day after day, migrants waited. Some were conscripted as laborers. For \$1 a day, detainees maintained their own prison. Diederich captured Haitian crews "with American contractors... landscaping [and] building sidewalks." Inside, refugees gathered around radios to listen to Creole-language broadcasts. This was their only way of remaining tethered to the world beyond Krome's walls. Women styled each other's hair, washed clothes, and tended small gardens. Photographers preserved these quiet scenes of daily life along with refugees' chief pastime—idleness. As *Après Dieu*, a native of Aux Cayes, told Diederich, "he has little to do...little to think about except what there is behind the fence and how his family is in Haiti. His main worry is that he is so limited in the camp that he believes he is wasting his life and might die there" (Diederich, "Haitians," May 1982).

This disquieting inertia was palpable. Today, Krome's atmosphere remains imprinted in Monroe's memory: "Time seemed suspended; everything seemed hyper-real" (Monroe, 2018). Diederich's field notes are littered with descriptions of "bored, baffled and belligerent" detainees "passing another lethargic day of their prison term which...could be in perpetuity" (Diederich, "haitians, tk: 1," June 1981). In this atmosphere, migrants became involuntary riders on what Father Thomas Wenski called an " 'emotional roller coaster' " (Diederich, "Haitians TK: 1," 7 July 1982). "The most natural picture," Diederich affirmed, "is boredom and frustration" (Diederich, "Haitians TK: 1," 20 May 1982). Mahoney and Carlebach echoed this sentiment: "Above all, there was the crippling boredom" (Mahoney and Carlebach, 1982: 11). At the same time, anger intensified. Women, Diederich reported, were "close to being violent. If you attempt to joke with them they come back [with]...a seething anger that might one day overflow...women, who protest the loudest and...don't fear the authorities...have finished a hunger strike to protest their indefinite limbo" (Diederich, "Haitians TK: 2," 20 May 1982).

Psychologically, migrants were devastated. Psychiatrists predicted dire consequences for Krome's residents. " 'Hope is about all these people had,' " they cautioned, " 'and the loss of hope can be fateful' " (Diederich, "Haitians TK: 1," 5 May 1982). The Greater Miami Religious Community warned Reagan of pervasive distress: "Refugees have been at Krome for long

periods of time and have no idea what the future holds...prolonged detention in limbo create[s] severe mental depression" (Greater Miami Religious Community, Letter to Ronald Reagan, 16 October 1981). Diederich described the ills wrought by this cocktail of stupefying boredom, acute anxiety, and deep disillusionment best: "imprisonment at Krome is...Zombiefying these people" (Diederich, "Haitians," May 1982).

In *Tropic*, Krome's miserable conditions ([Images 8, 9, 10](#)) and the activity of waiting took center stage. One aerial shot displayed rows of orderly refugees (Image 10). "The Haitians would line up for meals in tight, body-upon-body lines," the caption explained. "They weren't ordered to do so. The discipline seemed to come naturally" (Mahoney and Carlebach, 1982: 9). Carlebach's archive is full of panoramic shots of Krome's yard ([Image 11](#)). On the back of one photo, he jotted: "Haitian refugees waiting around with nothing to do, nowhere to go." This is a turbulent image. Detainees are jumbled together anarchically. Their gazes dart across the yard, zig-zagging this way and that. Tangled, indistinguishable bodies hover around the circus tent that doubled as a shelter. Taken-in as a whole, the photo screams. You can almost hear the raucous noise, sense the hectic commotion, feel the topsy-turvy disorder.

Tropic featured a similar shot of three women waiting in Krome's yard ([Image 12](#)). Detainees confessed that having too much time for their minds to wander was a dangerous thing: "it le[ft] them to dream and worry about 'freedom' too much." As one Haitian told Diederich, cradling his head: " 'You can't be at ease in prison.' " This, many explained, this was an onerous burden. " 'Tête-moin pa la,' " one refugee lamented. "This feeling of his head not being right worried him...[he said] it was because 'they are never going to let us out.' " Tapping his temple, another cried: " 'I'm shut up inside" (Diederich, "Haitians TK: 2," 20 May 1982). After their release, a group of Haitian women explained the damage that Krome inflicted:

Upon arriving, our eyes widened with fear and surprise at the conditions of life. We thought we were throwing ourselves into a stable. One thousand persons are jammed into one and the same cell. It reminds us of black slavery. But alas, after shedding many tears and imploring God to come help us, we finally resigned ourselves to accepting this sufferance...We hoped that maybe in 8, 10, or 15 days we would be called to be freed...We were made to sit in a room where we were to spend the night. In this distress, the room was like a wake, where sad songs were

being sung. At any moment, an enormous chill would run down the spine (“The Unhappy Refugees of Enclave VI,” in Stepick and Swartz, 1986: 4).

Carlebach captured refugees whose minds were working overtime—obsessively and to the point of exhaustion. But what *exactly* were they thinking? Perhaps they worried about their families’ fate in Haiti. Maybe they plotted how to avoid a particularly troublesome guard. Their concerns might have been more mundane—how awful breakfast tasted, for instance. They might have been calculating the days they had already lost to Krome, praying that the tally would not rise further (Diederich, “Haitians,” 16 July 1982; “Haitians TK: 3,” 20 May 1982). Viewers were pulled into that vortex of uncertainty. That opaqueness is frustrating—but it is also enlightening. Here, one of the camera’s limits is an asset. A photograph will never tell you what the subject was thinking. It captures physical form, not psychological essence. On this latter score, images are mute. In this case, that silence is generative. It compels speculation. Viewers are obliged to cycle through the litany of anxieties that *might* have consumed the pictured migrants. If we lean-in to that vagueness, we come closer to grasping the frenetic anxiety that consumed detainees.

Aesthetically, Monroe’s exhibit embraced a similar tension. *Detention’s* narrative arc—or lack thereof—was disorienting. Instead of following refugees as they arrived at Krome and passed a day in the camp, Monroe stirred-up temporality. Scenes of the screening process mingled with photos of mealtimes and recreation (*Detention at Krome*, 1982: 2-4). *Detention* did more than abandon linear storytelling—it discarded narrative entirely. None of the shots were captioned. If photographs crave narration, Monroe starved his images. He deprived viewers of the verbal clues that conventionally anchor and lend sense to the visual. Most likely, audiences were confused. Intentionally, Monroe denied viewers the comforts of coherence or closure. “ ‘The order in which photographs are presented determines how a person feels as they move through the space,’ ” he explains. “ ‘The picture before and the picture after determine how you perceive the one you’re looking at’ ” (Puzo, 1982: 8).

Monroe’s images are simple—he has no patience for “gimmickry”—yet captivating. “ ‘I use the most elementary systems I can devise and work with a very simply Leica 35 mm camera, shoot standard black and white film and use no darkroom manipulation. The results are very pure pictures...The kind of work I do is very esoteric, in that it is not readily accessible or understandable to the general public and usually when people appreciate it, it’s for a variety of reasons’ ” (Puzo, 1982: 16). His portraits of inertia are exceptional in this

respect. In these shots, refugees stare, sit idly, or appear to be asleep ([Images 13, 14, 15](#)). By preserving immobility, they invite viewers to witness the repetitive, monotonous nature of life inside Krome's walls.

7. Solitude

Thus far, we have trekked through photographs that walk a tightrope between revelation and obfuscation. Our last stop is a pair of images that strand us on the darker side of that divide. During one of his visits, Carlebach found a woman alone, perched on desolate terrain ([Image 16](#)). Her back is turned almost completely—but not entirely—to us. She might have been feeling or doing *anything*: crying, laughing, or dreaming. Perhaps she just wanted a break, a few moments to shut out the world and disappear. Spectators cannot know for certain. In *Detention*, Monroe included a similar photograph of refugees whose faces are deliberately hidden from the camera ([Image 17](#)).

Recall that Krome was a space of near perpetual surveillance. In these images, migrants thwart that scrutiny. They refused to look at the lens. Carlebach and Monroe validated their right to turn away—what historian Kevin Coleman might call their “right not to be looked at” (Coleman, 2015: 44-45). So often, the camera acts as an instrument of intrusive surveillance. Not here. In Carlebach and Monroe's hands, it captured refugees' ability to keep something—anything—private. Viewers will always look at them *not* looking back. In defiance of a detention regime that reduced persons to objects, these photographs illustrated every migrant's right to conceal themselves and guard their subjectivity. When they posed for these images, refugees disrupted the detention regime's logic. They rebuffed inspection. They refused to give up their bodies, their minds, and their every movement to the spectator's gaze. They asserted their right to a privilege that all ought to be afforded, one that became a rare commodity within Krome's walls: the protection of solitude.

8. The “Burdens” of Krome Photography

What did photographers, refugees, and the public make of these images? Many in the art world saw them as important historical records and brutal indictments of the detention system. Renée Landes, the director of the gallery where Monroe's images were displayed, praised his exhibit. “ ‘Monroe,’ ” she explained, “ ‘brings intelligence and sensitivity to his

work, which I think will have an impact on our society...[his photography is] powerful and beautiful...because it documents a historical event...We've invited the Haitian groups and organizations that work with Haitians and are hoping that they will be interested in the show' " (Puzo, 1982: 8). Critics were also complimentary. Helen Kohen congratulated Monroe on "opening" the public's "eyes":

In a remarkable sequence of photographs, intimate yet detached, Gary Monroe has recorded another passage in an ongoing American epic. The subject—a people behind fences—[is] loaded. The plight of the Haitians, fleeing from one sort of authority and running into another, carries historical and humanist burdens that are hard to put by...these burdens assail the viewer...The Haitians themselves have much to do with making this exhibit an enjoyable experience instead of a dirge. Mostly young and handsome, they carry themselves with an innate dignity, and they clearly demonstrate a warmth for each other...Locked into a situation and caught between an imagined and real freedom, the Haitians at Krome do not laugh or smile very much in these photographs. The passing seriousness tells in their body language and in their facial expressions. They [are] a community on trial...thanks to Monroe, there is an extraordinary record of what [that] was like (Kohen, 1982: 2F).

Monroe pledged to be a neutral observer. Still, spectators were struck by the force of his "intimate yet detached" photographs.

One *Tropic* reader "congratulated" Mahoney and Carlebach for their "admirable," "excellent analysis of the Haitians inside Krome. [They] report of people, and not only of the Haitians as a *class* of people—vividly bringing home the tragic truth of the Reagan Administration's racist policies" (Casden, 1982: 6). Another explained that he "came away with a feeling of sorrow for the refugees and of shame for this country's lack of compassion and understanding in providing such a shelter" (Stecker, 1982: 6).

At the same time, Krome photography ignited xenophobic sentiments. One Key West resident called "Welcome to Camp Krome" "the sort of apologist tripe that helps perpetuate Florida's refugee problem. These people are Haitians, not Americans. They don't have constitutional rights...Sure, things are tough in Haiti. Things are tough all over...Things are different in 1982 than in 1886. The words on the Statute of Liberty no longer apply. We've got enough tired and poor right here in America that need our time, money, and energy" (Reid, 1982: 6).

For his part, Carlebach believes that his work exposed the reality of Haitian migrants' experience in South Florida: "Stories dealing with the Mariel boatlift were everywhere...video and still pictures seemed ubiquitous. Not so with the Haitians...My job, as I understood it, was to make pictures that would be used to illustrate what was going on in the middle of the Everglades, and perhaps persuade folks in Washington to improve conditions out there." But measuring the impact of his photography is difficult:

I know that Larry made my photographs available to the government, but I have no idea if they really made any difference. Certainly, the publication of my photographs of Krome led to greater public understanding of some of the sordid intricacies of official immigration policy. However, the Reagan administration continued to take a pretty tough stance toward Haitian immigration and was even more effective than its predecessor at keeping Haitians off the beaches of South Florida. Ultimately, the government may have concluded that the best policy is to keep reporters and photographers permanently away from facilities like Krome.

Still, Carlebach sees the camera as an essential tool for accessing histories of migrant detention. "The power of photographs to describe and persuade makes them a powerful tool for historians who seek to illuminate and explain the past," he explains. "The evidence contained in documentary images seems irrefutable, which is why the usual policy is to keep photographers out of 'sensitive areas.' Photographs cannot tell the whole story, perhaps, but they can tell a lot of it, and thus greatly enhance human understanding. There is really nothing at all like those discrete slices of time that so perfectly limn the real world" (Carlebach, 2017).

9. Photography in Limbo

In Krome, photography was a powerful—if imperfect—tool of social protest. These images may not have inspired change. Nor did they inevitably lead to solidarity with undocumented migrants. They did, however, educate and inform. When they captured life within Krome's walls, Diederich, Carlebach, and Monroe pushed the social documentary genre in a new direction. They used it to chronicle a new phenomenon—undocumented migration—that unfolded in a new, usually restricted space—the detention facility. In the early 1980s, they captured a reality that most Americans had not witnessed. They critiqued some of the most damaging features of incarceration. That knowledge pushed some viewers to acknowledge the "tragic truth" of refugee policy.

All too often, the state denigrates unauthorized migrants as criminals that ought to be contained and discarded. Detention sights disrupt that logic. They encourage viewers to encounter refugees with compassionate, insightful empathy. In the early-1980s, they invited—but did not guarantee—solidarity between citizen spectators and undocumented refugees. Today, they are vital sources that reveal the camera's historical role in resisting migrant detention.

At the same time, these photos go beyond critiquing conditions in one solitary prison at the edge of the Everglades. What was true for Krome's inmates four decades ago holds today for Latin Americans confined in detention facilities along the U.S.-Mexico border and North Africans caught on Mediterranean shores. In images of Krome, we have unfortunate glimpses of what, in the 21st century, have metastasized into chronic symptoms of the state's relationship with unauthorized border-crossers.

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