The Struggle for Black Freedom in Miami: Civil Rights and America’s Tourist Paradise, 1896–1968


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*The Struggle for Black Freedom in Miami: Civil Rights and America’s Tourist Paradise, 1896–1968* significantly contributes to the existing literature with a much-needed discussion on Miami, Florida. Chanelle Rose opens with the story of Patricia Stephens Due, leader of Tallahassee’s Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and participant at Royal Castle’s lunch-counter demonstration in 1959. This protest predated the more well-known sit-in demonstrations that began in Greensboro, North Carolina, the following year and which have received substantial attention from scholars and the public ever since. Rose points out that Due’s experience and Miami’s civil rights’ struggles are “more complex” and have largely been omitted from the traditional narrative (p. 1). Therefore, Miami serves as a lens to better understand modernity, tourism, and constructs of race in the civil rights movement. Rose avers that overall, tourism, immigration and internal migration, and evolving constructs of African American identity restricted and provided new avenues for freedom in Miami’s civil rights’ struggles.

In three thematic and chronological sections, Rose surveys Miami as a foundation for further research on other southern cities overlooked in the traditional civil rights’ story. Divided into two chapters, part 1 investigates how the rise of tourism in Miami in the early twentieth century impacted local African Americans’ efforts to achieve equality. Chapters 3 through 5 make up part 2 and underline how civil rights’ leaders chipped away at “Miami’s tourist façade” to expose and challenge accommodationists and a history of racial discrimination (p. 10). Part 3 examines how Spanish migration (tourists and Cuban exiles), the city’s white elite, and the NAACP experienced and shaped efforts for equal housing, education, and voting rights. Spanning over seventy years, the multifaceted approach traces the complex and arduous history local Miamians and northern and Caribbean transplants experienced following the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling.

This work utilizes a variety of sources and methodologies to address several questions regarding the “incomplete” story of Miami’s civil rights movement (p. 8). How did African immigrants, northern transplants (especially Jewish), and Cold War hysteria change the course of civil rights in Miami? How did tourism and large numbers of Spanish-speaking tourists impact race relations before and after 1959? These central queries are addressed through extensive analysis, leaving Rose to conclude “these questions provide a window into much-debated issues about the color line, immigration, border cultures and the civil rights movement in twentieth-century America” (p. 2). The author describes Marvin Dunn’s *Black Miami* (1997), for example, as “the most comprehensive study of blacks in South Florida; however, his book offers a limited analysis of the movement within the broader context of the black freedom struggle” (p. 3). Numerous primary and secondary sources like the *Miami Herald* and Michael Gannon’s *The New History of Florida* (1996) consequently pick up the conversation where previous publications left off. Demographic statistics highlight the increase in the foreign and native-born black population that coincided with the completion of the Flagler Railroad and city boosters marketing Miami in the early twentieth century as a tourist paradise while deemphasizing its history of segregation. Also, oral his-
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The Marcus Garvey Papers, edited by Robert Hill, provide a window into the experience and role of Bahamian transplants in the early twentieth-century fight for freedom.

One of the book’s many strengths is its revealing of the foundation that the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) established for later activist organizations like the NAACP and CORE addressed in part 3. Chapter 1, “The Racial Politics of Boosterism, Black Protest, and Jim Crow Tourism,” begins with the story of Bahamian Albert Gibson who worked clearing the Everglades before moving to Coconut Grove in 1910 and subsequently joining the UNIA. As a consequence of Miami’s Jim Crow laws, Gibson used his British citizenship as a force of defiance in a city that treated its own native-born African-American residents as second-class citizens. Gibson’s story, recorded in a 1975 interview, illustrates how native and foreign-born blacks experienced the fight for equality. Rose likewise does a great job analyzing the UNIA as a precursor to the black activism that emerged later in the twentieth century. For example, chapter 1 dedicates noteworthy attention to the role of UNIA leaders and other organizations like the Negro Uplift Association (NUA) in resisting police brutality and racial violence. Additionally, images of activists ranging from black Bahamians in Coconut Grove around 1890 to Miami NAACP attorney G. E. Graves and chapter president Father Theodore Gibson riding in the front of a city bus circa 1957, provide the reader with a visual representation of the diverse struggle against discrimination in Miami. Rose effectively argues that “despite its decline, the UNIA nurtured the radicalism of various black activists that continued the struggle for black liberation over the next several decades” (p. 40).

As a whole, Rose’s work encompasses a litany of strengths and historiographical contributions. The interviews included in Joann Biondi’s Miami Beach Memories: A Nostalgic Chronicle of Days Gone By (2007) buttress Rose’s argument that as restrictions against Jewish visitors and residents declined, new mechanisms emerged to limit the freedom and rights of African Americans in the Magic City. Citing the Miami Herald, for example, Rose points out that by 1939 migrants of Jewish descent comprised some 25 percent of visitors in Miami Beach. At the same time, however, Rose underlines how Miami Beach established an ordinance in 1936 requiring all domestic and hospitality workers regardless of race to carry identification cards, purportedly to protect public health and security.[1] Several other important topics concerning Miami’s black freedom struggle are: FBI reports on Miami’s UNIA Bahamian membership and surveillance of individual leaders, the Double-V campaign of World War II, and the red-baiting attacks during the 1950 Smathers-Beach campaign for state senate, discussed in chapter 4. This reviewer also appreciates how Miami’s story is interwoven with larger civil rights’ tragedies like the 1951 Carver Village bombing, the murders of Harry and Harriette Moore later the same year, and the Liberty City riots of 1968. The Struggle for Black Freedom in Miami builds a firm foundation for scholars to investigate civil rights’ campaigns in other cities.

At times, however, this reader found the book lacking working-class agency and historical clarity. However, Rose states that “closer examination of working-class and poor black women’s activism in much-neglected cities like Miami is needed to better understand the complexity of gender politics in the Black Power era” (p. 240). Population and voting tables would have also added to this work’s many contributions. One unclear historical example is the final weakness that detracts from an overall well-researched and -written book. Rose confuses the reader when interpreting the 1963 Gibson v. Florida Legislative Investigation Committee ruling, which “reversed the contempt charges [against Miami NAACP leaders Gibson and Graham] and found no compelling link between the NAACP and Communist activities” (p. 161). When summarizing the case’s outcome, for instance, the author states “conservative Chief Justice John Marshall and Felix Frankfurter led the court in a five-to-four split siding with FLIC” (p. 161). The chief justice at that time was actually Earl Warren, but this is a minor mistake in an otherwise solid history. These critiques do not devalue Rose’s ability to weave the story of numerous Miami leaders and events into the larger story of Florida and American civil rights.

Note

[1]. This reviewer would have liked to see the author corroborate this claim with stronger sources than a newspaper.

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